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The Wrath Upon The Persecutors

We've seen proper service in the body of Christ. Paul and Silas have put themselves forward as examples of how to serve. Service is the key theme of 1 Thessalonians 2. Any time we speak about the doctrine of service we want to be clear about two basic truths. First, Christians do not serve in order to be spiritual. That's a reversal of the truth. What would that mean? If we serve in order to be spiritual then serving is the means to spirituality, and that means we work in order to be spiritual. Phrased that way it sounds wrong on the face of it. So we said we serve because we have already become spiritual. Service is an outgrowth of spirituality. Spirituality is being defined in this context as maturity. So to make this understandable here's how it all works. At some point in your life you heard the gospel. If you believed the gospel then at that moment you enter into phase 1 of salvation. Phase 1 is the past tense of salvation. You have been saved from the penalty of sin, you have been justified before God, and you have a new position in Christ. There are a number of other things that happened but central to it all is you have a new position in Christ. Then you enter into phase 2 of salvation which is the present tense. You are being saved from the power of sin, you are being sanctified; this is your experience in Christ. Finally we have phase 3 of salvation which is the future tense. You will be saved from the presence of sin altogether, you will be glorified; this is your ultimate destiny in Christ, your resurrection.

Now, throughout phase 2, the present tense of salvation, when you are being sanctified, where you are growing spiritually there are two dimensions. The first dimension is the existential dimension. You can be in or out of fellowship with God. Fellowship meaning intimacy, closeness, there's no sin between you and the Father. When you trusted in Christ for eternal salvation you were immediately in fellowship with God the Father but the moment you

committed your first sin as a Christian you were knocked out of fellowship. And to be restored to fellowship you have to confess your sin. That's 1 John 1:9. "If we confess our sins He is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness". Now if you don't know you sinned, if you're unaware, then when you commit a sin you do know you confess that sin and at that moment you're cleansed of all sin and restored to fellowship. That's the existential dimension of sanctification. You are either in or out of fellowship at any given moment, there's no in-between. You're either in-or-out and to grow spiritually you want to remain in fellowship as much as possible. The second dimension of sanctification we call the long-term dimension and this is growth over time. As you learn to stay in fellowship, which the Bible calls abiding, and you study the word of God and you learn to pray you grow in knowledge of the word of God and your ability to apply the word of God. And step by step you are moving toward maturity. Maturity is the biblical way of expressing true spirituality. It means being a grown up believer, an adult spiritually, one who has extensive knowledge of the word of God and by practice has learned to use this knowledge in handling the details of life. Of course one who is mature still has room left for maturing. So spirituality ultimately means *a believer who is mature yet maturing*. And it's the mature yet maturing believer that is one who serves like Paul and Silas. He serves because he is spiritual and it's a natural outworking of his maturity. So the first point about spirituality is that we serve because we are spiritual, not to become spiritual. If we served to become spiritual then it would be our works that resulted in spirituality and not God's grace.

The second point we want to be clear about when we speak about service is that service is not doing something for God. Service is offering yourself as an instrument to God. Christians are often confused about their responsibility. Their responsibility, for example, in the fruit of the Spirit passage of Gal 5, is not to produce the fruit of the Spirit. We can't produce the fruit of the Spirit; it's His produce, not ours. And we are never commanded to produce the fruit of the Spirit. We are commanded to walk by means of the Spirit. That means constantly relying upon Him and His word. As we do His fruit is produced through us in service. So the second point of the doctrine of service is that service is not us doing something for God, it is Him doing something through us as we submit to His word. If service were doing something for God then it would be our flesh doing it. But when we offer ourselves as an instrument to God the service stems from the Spirit. So our spiritual act of service is to offer

ourselves as an instrument to God to be used for his glory. “Lord, not My will be done but Thy will be done.” Jesus did this perfectly and Jesus is our model for how to live the Christian life. So passages like John 15, “Abide in Me and I in you and you shall bear much fruit,” speak to this idea. Passages like Romans 12, “offer yourselves as living sacrifices” speak to this idea. And passages like Romans 6 express it this way, “offer yourselves as instruments of righteousness.” We are simply instruments through which the music is played, we are not the musicians, the Holy Spirit is the musician, and we are the violin.

Now, this is exactly what Paul and Silas had been in the hands of the Holy Spirit. In 1 Thessalonians 2:1-2 we saw how God at Philippi prepared Paul and Silas beforehand for their ministry at Thessalonica where they had to deliver the gospel amidst much opposition. Had they not suffered and been mistreated at Philippi they would not have been prepared to preach the gospel in such a hostile environment at Thessalonica. And so we learned that God uses circumstances in our lives that He providentially brings in order to prepare us for the future, for future ministry, because all believers are called to minister to one another.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:3-12 we see how Paul and Silas served the Thessalonians - how they did not serve and how they did serve. There's a series of negatives, we did not do this and we did not do that is followed by a series of positives, we did do this and we did do that. And the manner in which Paul and Silas came to them was described both as a mother and as a father. The mother being the life giver. She is tender. She is gentle. And such were Paul and Silas as they ministered to the Thessalonians. They did not treat them roughly. They served them tenderly as a mother, day and night. Then on the other side they came as a father; the father being the trainer. He is firm. He leads by example. He instructs in doctrine. He encourages. He affirms when his children doubt. And he challenges his children to walk the way he walks and learn the doctrine he teaches. So both as a mother and as a father Paul and Silas came to the Thessalonians.

Now we come to verses 13-16 where Paul and Silas commend them for their positive response to the word of God, and for imitating the churches in Judea that also suffered persecution and finally he concludes that the Jewish nation has filled up the measure of her sins in the 1st century by her rebellion

against God and that the Jewish nation is standing under the wrath of God; wrath is at the threshold and can fall at any moment. And this will get us into some interesting end-times discussion.

If we begin in verse 13, notice that he begins with the word **For**. When you see this word in the English translation it usually means an explanation is forthcoming. Paul wants to explain something and here he wants to explain why they constantly thank God for the Thessalonians. **For this reason we also constantly thank God, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.** Any preacher would be thankful for this. What preacher would not thank God that His congregation received the word of God as that which it really is, **not as the word of men but as the word of God**? Paul says we **constantly** gave thanks for this. Now, we're going to see the word **constantly** three times in 1 Thessalonians and always in the context of prayer. The first time is in 1:2 where they say "We give thanks to God *always* for all of you," the second use is our verse, 2:13 where they say, "for this reason we also *constantly* thank God," and finally we will see the last use in 5:17 where the famous command is given, "pray *without ceasing*." In all three verses the same exact word is used to describe Paul and Silas' prayer life. They had a very definite prayer life and we are to imitate their prayer life. Now what does it mean to pray without ceasing or constantly? People say how can you pray without ceasing? What does that mean? Pray 24 hours a day? Answer: no, it's an iterative present which means at intervals throughout the day. No one can pray 24 hours a day because you have to sleep. So what Paul and Silas did in 1:2, 2:13 and what he commands us to do in 5:17 is to constantly give thanks to God throughout the day at various intervals. And this is what Paul and Silas would do day after day they thought back at how the Thessalonians received the word of God, not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, and for that they gave thanks. That's a rarity, people don't usually accept it as the word of God, and they don't accept it as authoritative. They are like Eve in the Garden and they think we have some standard or criteria by which we in our own finite rationality can measure the word of God to see if it's really true. That's at the heart of sin. There are no criteria by which to judge the word of God. His word is implicitly true. There are no tests by which we can measure the Scriptures truthfulness or error. Let's say you did have a test. How would you

know the test was true? See the problem? Somewhere infallibility must rest. And either it will rest in God or man. The Thessalonians accepted that infallibility rests in God alone.

Paul and Silas were merely channels through which God's word came. They were apostles, as verse 6 says. Paul and Silas were apostles and an apostle was simply a messenger. A messenger who came in the authority of the sender. Since Christ was the sender then they came in the authority of Christ. And the Thessalonians understood that Paul and Silas were apostles and came in the authority of Christ such that when they spoke, they spoke the word of God and not the word of men.

So we have the doctrine of inspiration, which unfortunately is not so good a word today. When people think of the word inspiration they think that the apostles were inspired by a religious experience and out of their religious experience they wrote the NT. Sort of like a painter is inspired by a sunset. Well, that's not what the doctrine of inspiration is saying. The doctrine of inspiration is saying that the Scriptures are the exhalation of God, the out-breathing of God, given through men. If you put your hand in front of your mouth and you talk then you feel breath coming out because you can only talk when you're exhaling. If you try to talk while you're inhaling you can't. So, we might call this the doctrine of exhalation or divine exhalation. Because the primary source of the Scriptures is the breath of God. It is Him speaking out. He initiated the NT writings; not human beings who had some religious experience. The human beings were chosen as secondary instruments through which the exhalation of God was written down. But neither they nor their religious experience are the source of the exhalation. They were merely vessels through which God's word was delivered. And therefore since God is without error then whatever He says is without error. God protected the human authors such that what they wrote down was not contaminated by them. The word of God is absolutely unique. It's not the word of man, it's of a different nature altogether; it's the word of God and therefore inerrant, infallible and authoritative in all matters to which it addresses. Not just of faith and morals, but also to history and science. And the thing that impressed Paul about the Thessalonians is that they received it as such. And so he and Silas constantly, daily, gave thanks.

Francis Schaeffer wrote a book called *He is There and He is not Silent*, meaning that God speaks, God is not only the basis and ground of all existence, but He also speaks; He verbally reveals Himself. And He made man in His own image, animals are not made in His image, rocks are not made in His image. Only man is made in God's image and as such man is designed to speak language. Man is created with what Noam Chomsky of MIT called a syntax machine and the question has always been, "How did man learn to speak?" We have discovered feral children that somehow survived in the wild and they have never spoken a language. By language were speaking of propositional speech, predicating. So how did man learned to speak? Biblically, where would we turn to answer this question? The book of Genesis. Any time you discuss the question of how something originated, what's the origin of this or that, always turn to Genesis. So when we turn to the origin of language where do we turn? Genesis. And who is the first speaker in Genesis? It's not a man, it's not Adam, it's not a woman, it's not Eve, it's God. What did God say? "Let there be light!" and there was light. That's not a problem for God. Even before He created the world by language He could speak among Himself. The Father could speak to the Son, the Son could speak to the Holy Spirit and the Holy Spirit could speak to the Father. They had fellowship. So, language is already there within the Trinity before the creation was even there. Jesus talks about it in John 17. So who taught Adam to speak? When God made man he made him with a syntax machine that could learn language. And who do you think taught Adam to speak? God did. God gave Adam his first vocabulary and Adam being made the image of God was able to, with his syntax machine, organize and understand the language. There's no barrier between God and man. God can speak and man can understand what God speaks. And after God gave Adam some vocabulary, "Adam, this is light and that's darkness, this is God, and that's water, and this is land, not the bird, that's fish, etc..." then God said, "now Adam, I want you to name the animals, I want you to start speaking, creatively classifying these creatures I made. I made you to have Dominion over the earth and so here, go ahead, I want you to have Dominion by naming. And so he learned from God to speak and from that point forward since language has been injected into the human race it can be passed from father to son, mother to daughter and so forth down through the human race. But God had to get the ball rolling. He's the first speaker.

But the point I want to get to in our doctrine of language is that here Paul is giving thanks that when they heard the word of God they received it not as the word of men but as it really is, the word of God! How did this happen? If Paul is giving thanks to God for this then who is the reason they received it as the word of God? The Thessalonians? No, God. God made them hear it as His word and not merely the word of men. What did Jesus say in the famous John 10, "My sheep hear My voice and they follow Me." If you have ever seen a shepherd with his sheep they will take their sheep to the watering hole and other shepherds will take their sheep to the same watering hole and all the shepherds will get together and have their little discussions and when they are done and the herds are watered what do they do? They call out to their sheep. And what happens? The sheep are all mixed up but what happens? They separate out and follow the voice of their Shepherd. And that's what Paul is giving thanks for, when we spoke the word of God you heard His voice and you followed Him. Who orchestrated that? God did. God gets the thanks for that. God is the one who made them recognize that when Paul and Silas spoke the gospel it wasn't Paul and Silas' word, it was the word of God.

Now, look at the end of verse 13, not only did they receive the word of God for what it truly is, the word of God, but at the end of verse 13 what else does the word of God do? **it performs its work in you who believe.** What if you don't believe it? Then it doesn't perform its work in you. It's very simple. You can sit over there with your verses memorized, but if you don't believe the verses then they won't work. You can quote them all day long but until you're convinced they are true and you rest your confidence in them they won't work.

When we do believe the word of God performs work in us to develop us, to grow us spiritually with the ultimate benefit to God himself. His essence is reflected in a finite way to the world around us as we believe the word of God and apply it in our lives. In other words, this is our testimony which is what verse 14 is all about. The Thessalonians were believing the word of God and the word of God was performing its work in them in the midst of persecution.

So let's look at verse 14. **For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endure the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵who both killed the Lord Jesus and**

the prophets, and drove us out. Let's stop there. There's a comparison between the kind of suffering faced in Judea by Jewish believers and the kind of suffering faced in Thessalonica by Gentile believers. And how they handled it was a great testimony. It's a stunning testimony because they haven't been believers very long. And yet they were able to stand up to tremendous opposition. **For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea.** Now Judea is a Jewish region that encompasses Jerusalem and this is where the gospel began, it began in the city of Jerusalem, it went out into the Judea and Samaria and now it's in Thessalonica which is in the uttermost parts of the earth. That's the outline of the Book of Acts, the gospel would follow that three-stage going out. And here in **Judea**, stage two, you had Jews in Judea believe in the Messiahship of Jesus and you also had Jewish unbelievers, you always have both, and this caused controversy. If someone is running around in Jewish circles saying someone is the Messiah it's going to cause controversy. And the controversy in Judea caused the Jewish believers to suffer persecution from the Jewish unbelievers.

The gospel was heavily persecuted by the Jews in the early church and in fact, Paul had been one of the chief persecutors, he wrote the rule book on how to persecute Jewish believers. Paul was a very zealous and influential individual. His zeal was just a little misdirected. But he was so zealous that he had Stephen murdered in Acts 7-8 and Luke describes Paul as a ravaging wolf who went out and arrested and murdered Jewish Christians, male, female, it didn't matter to Paul. Paul hated Jesus and if you believed Jesus was the Messiah, he would arrest you and kill you. And when Paul was converted this persecution was picked up by other Jews. And that's what Paul is reporting on. And he says in verse 14, **you** Thessalonian believers **became imitators** of those Jewish believers in that, **you also endured the sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews**, which shows you the makeup of the church in Thessalonica was primarily Gentile. We said the makeup before was described in the Book of Acts as "some Jews," "many Gentiles," and "a number of the leading women," who also would have been Gentile. So the majority of the church at Thessalonica was Gentile and they were suffering at the hands of fellow Gentiles. We don't know where this group of antagonist Gentiles came from or why, we can only speculate. Because of 1 Thess 1:9 there was a backlash from their fellow Gentiles. Remember in 1 Thess 1:9 we said Paul is

commending the church at Thessalonica for their unique testimony. Look at this, you don't find this of any other church in the NT, "you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God." This was a testimony that was sounding forth in all Macedonia and Achaia and all over the place. And the reason it was sounding forth was because this was a radical move, this was as counter cultural as you can get. Everybody worshipped the gods and goddesses. It was a part of polite Roman society. That move was very counter-cultural and was not acceptable behavior in polite Roman society. You did not turn against the local gods or goddesses. So what were you saying if you did? That polite Roman society was wrong! It was polite in Roman society to engage in the worship at the local Temple of the god or goddess. So to break from that was to say, in effect, that those who worshipped at the local Temple were wrong. So it is my speculation, and take it for what it's worth, but they were suffering, the Christian suffered because they refused to worship any created thing. It's just a guess but they were suffering at the hands of their own countrymen, the Gentiles and they were imitating the Jewish believers in Judea who also suffered at the hands of their countrymen, the Jews. Verse 15, now Paul is going to very characteristically go after the Jewish people. Paul was a Jew himself and he loved his people and he said he wished he were cut off from Christ for the sake of his Jewish brethren. So it is uncharacteristic of Paul to go after the Jewish people like this but Paul also realized something else, and that is the seriousness of the Jewish people's sins and he cites three; **who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out**. Who, in the context killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out? The Jews. Jewish people did these three things; they killed the Lord Jesus; they killed the prophets and they drove Paul and other Jewish believers out of the land of Israel. Let's look at these three charges Paul drops.

First, the Jews **killed the Lord Jesus**. Is this true? Yes, this is true. But to keep the balance turn to Acts 4. You want to be careful here because if you lean too hard on 1 Thess 2:15, the Jews killed Jesus, the Jews killed the prophets, the Jews drove Paul out, it's a very short step to anti-Semitism. I'm warning you of how people can take one little verse and disregard all the other verses and get into heresy. Acts 4:27; this is a healthy verse because once you've been through this you realize if you're going to be anti-Semitic you also have to be anti-Gentile and anti-God. Here's a verse that sheds some light on who crucified Jesus Christ. "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, ²⁸to do whatever Your hand and Your purpose predestined to occur.” Now who killed Christ? Did the Jews kill Christ? Yes. Are they the only ones who killed Christ? No, you’ve got Herod and Pontius Pilate singled out, you’ve also got the Gentiles. They’re all involved in killing Christ. It’s not the Jews only that are Christ-killers. Then if you look at v 28 what else can we say? It was a part of God’s plan. God wrote the death of His own Son into the plan. Now you say, well if that’s the case then these people aren’t really responsible, they were only doing what they had to do; God made them - like little robots - carry out His plan. Excuse me, but another part of the plan is that man is responsible to God. Just because God has a plan doesn’t mean man is not responsible. It’s the fact that God does have a plan that man is responsible. If there is no plan then who could man possibly be responsible to? So the fact of a plan doesn’t remove responsibility, it establishes it. All these groups are responsible for it.

And do you know why the Bible puts verses like verse 28 in there? Think if it was not in there. Just erase verse 28 from the text and think what you might conclude? Well, I guess man really does control whatsoever comes to pass. I guess man can spoil God’s plans, God’s not really that big. See where it leads? You’ve put God and man all in the same box; we’re all on the same level in a contest over where history is going. No, no, God controls history, man is inside of history and however man functions inside of history he’s held responsible for his choices. The Bible is not fatalistic. There’s Personal Sovereignty and there’s human responsibility. And in Acts 4:27-28 we have both. All these people made a genuine choice to crucify Jesus Christ and yet it was part of God’s sovereign plan. Not a problem in the world. But take heed to this verse because it protects you from making the grave mistake of writing the Jews off. Most of Christendom has written the Jews off. Roman Catholic Theology and Reformed Theology share in common the doctrine of replacement theology; that the Church has replaced Israel. And basically they really like verses like 1 Thess 2:15-16. See, the Jews are the Christ killers, it’s their fault and now God is through with the Jew. We’re the church and we’re the true people of God and He’s going to bless us, but He’s cursed the Jews, never going to restore them, never going to fulfill His promises to them, all the blessing and promise is transferred to the Church. Excuse me, but what about Acts 4:27-28? It sounds to me like Jews and Gentiles killed

Christ. It seems to me like this was God's plan. I don't see anything like the Jews are all alone the Christ-killers. So there's a balance to this thing and basically it comes down to the fact that God has a program for the Church and God has a program for Israel and God is faithful to His program for both.

Let's look at the second charge in 1 Thess 2:15. Paul is pointing out the seriousness of the Jewish nation's sin in rejecting their Messiah. Remember, Jesus came to His own people. His mission was to the Jews. He didn't come to the Gentiles. He came to the Jews. What did He say in Matt 10, Go not in the way of the Gentiles, go only to the house of Israel. It's not till after Israel rejected Him did He say, go to all nations. So there's a particular failure by the Jewish nation for rejecting their Messiah and there are consequences to that in verse 16. But let's look at the second charge Paul cites against the Jews. They **killed the prophets**. Did they do that? Yeah they did that. But is this talking about the OT prophets before Christ or the NT prophets after Christ? Turn to Matt 23. This is an expose of Pharisaism. Remember, in the gospels the argument is almost always coming from the Pharisees. Later in Acts the argument will come from the Sadducees. But most of the time Jesus was dealing with the Pharisees. And in this chapter He's denouncing the Pharisaic leadership. These were the people who were supposed to lead the nation in the word of God. But they'd done exactly the opposite. Observe verse 29, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and adorn the monuments of the righteous,³⁰ and say, 'If we had been *living* in the days of our fathers, we would not have been partners with them in *shedding* the blood of the prophets.'" It's like people today who say, oh, if we had been in the garden we wouldn't have eaten the fruit, we wouldn't have done that, we're not like that. Baloney. Verse 31, "you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets."³² "Fill up, then, the measure of *the guilt* of your fathers." He says, go ahead, keep murdering the prophets, fill up the measure of your sins. You're doing such a good job of it, go ahead and finish the job! Verse 33, "You serpents, you brood of vipers," By the way, why do you think He calls them serpents? Who's the serpent? Satan. Whose seed are they? Not Abraham's seed. Satan's seed. Then He asks, if you are Satan's seed please tell me "how will you escape the sentence of hell?"³⁴ "Therefore, behold, I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city," What's he doing? He's saying, your fathers rejected the prophets

who spoke of Me, now I'm going to send you more prophets and you're going to reject them. Why? Verse 35, "so that upon you may fall *the guilt of* all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar." So He's setting them for judgment. God sent them prophets in the OT, their fathers killed the prophets. Now Christ is going to send them prophets in the Book of Acts and they're going to kill these prophets. Who are the prophets in the Book of Acts they're going to kill? Stephen is one. Remember Acts 7? In that chapter Stephen prophecies and they don't like it one bit and so they take him out and stone him. That's the second charge against the Jews, you **killed...the prophets**. And we might mention that at the time Paul was Satan's seed, Paul was in hearty agreement with stoning the prophet Stephen. But you can escape being Satan's seed by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ and becoming Abraham's seed as long as you're alive, which is what Paul did.

Now turn back to 1 Thess 2:15, the third charge against the Jews. What's the third charge? They **drove us out**, they drove Paul and other Jewish believers out of Jerusalem and Judea. Did they do that? Yeah they did that. So let's turn to the Book of Acts to see it. Acts 9. I'll just give the case of Paul as a sampling. In Acts 9 we have one of the greatest conversions in history. I say that because it's recorded on five different occasions in the word of God. Who's conversion? Saul's conversion. You know him by Paul, his Greek name, Saul was his Hebrew name. In Acts 9, Saul is trying to chase down some Jewish Christians in Damascus and kill them. On the way he becomes a Christian. And as an aside, don't ever think anyone is beyond God's reach. If God can reach Saul then God can reach anyone. So now we have an interesting situation develop. Saul has changed sides and Saul begins to go into the synagogues and rather than search out at Damascus and proclaim that Jesus is the Son of God he was very logically and persuasively proving that Jesus was the Messiah! And what happened? Acts 9:23? Saul was driven out, "When many days had elapsed, the Jews plotted together to do away with him, ²⁴but their plot became known to Saul. They were also watching the gates day and night so that they might put him to death; ²⁵but his disciples took him by night and let him down through an opening in the wall, lowering him in a large basket." In verse 26 he goes back to Jerusalem and he's trying to hang out with the Jewish believers there, which freaks them out because this guy was a killer. Paul was a murderer that became a

Christian so don't think it can't happen. It does happen. But you can imagine the other believers were a bit afraid of him. Barnabas took him under his arm and said hey boy, you don't know what you're doing here, and you're scaring people. So he takes him to see the apostles and they hear him out and accept him. He starts going around Jerusalem arguing for the Messiahship of Jesus. Look at verse 29, "And he was talking and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death." This guy was a powerful preacher of the word, he was bold, he didn't hold back and he was making a lot of waves in Jerusalem and the other Jewish believers saw this so in verse 30, "But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him away to Tarsus." They said Paul, you've got to get out of here, you're stirring everything up and you're going to get yourself killed. So they shipped him off. That's what Paul's talking about in 1 Thess 2:15. The Lord was killed at the hands of the Jewish people, the prophets were killed at the hands of the Jewish people and we were driven out at the hands of the Jewish people. There was too much opposition to the gospel. The nation Israel, generally speaking was hardened in sin. I don't mean individual Jews can't come to Jesus as the Messiah, many did and do, but as far as the nation is concerned they were hardened and set for judgment in the first century.

Let's look at the end of verse 15, **They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men**, why does Paul say that? Why such a strong charge? Answer; because anyone who opposes the propagation of the gospel by which men are saved could not possibly please God. And anyone who opposes the propagation of the gospel by which men are saved could not be friendly to men. The most pleasing thing to God and the friendliest thing toward men is to give them the gospel by which they might be saved. These Jews were hindering the gospel. Observe verse 16, **hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved**; in God's book that's the most hostile thing anybody can do, hinder people from preaching the gospel so people **may be saved**. And today we have many nations committing this hostility, nations where it is against the law to preach the word of God, nations where it is against the law to have a Bible, nations where it is against the law to proclaim the gospel. So missionaries have to smuggle the word of God in so these people can hear the word of God and be saved.

And Paul says by hindering the gospel the result for the Jewish people in verse 16, **with the result that they always fill up the measure of their**

sins. It's a visual of a bucket and sins filling up the bucket and the nation Israel did that by killing the OT prophets, that filled some of the bucket, then they killed Christ, that filled more of the bucket, then they killed the NT prophets and that filled the bucket even more. Then they drove Paul out and others and now the bucket was full, they were ripe for judgment. God will allow a people to go only so far and then that's it, He judges. He extends grace, grace, grace and then finally if those people don't repent then He judges them. And what this is saying is that the nation Israel had been filling up their bucket of sin and now the bucket was full and God was ready to judge.

And so Paul says this at the end of verse 16, **But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.** That is, wrath has come upon the Jews. Now, let's think about this. When did Paul write this letter? AD51. And what does Paul say "had come upon" the Jews in AD51? **Wrath.** You say, in AD51? What wrath had come upon the Jews in AD51? Ronald Fung, one of the disciples of F. F. Bruce says of this phrase, "For good reason this final phrase has proven to be one of the more problematic passages in the entire Pauline corpus. The basic difficulties are with the verb "has come on them" and the concluding adverbial construction *eis telos*, since the two items stand in considerable tension with each other. And these in turn create a measure of difficulty for the word "wrath," in which Paul ordinarily refers to God's eschatological judgment, as in 1:10 and 5:9 in the present letter."ⁱ So let's look at this. First, what's the **wrath**? In the NT wrath is not a technical term. By a technical term we mean it always refers to the same thing. And in the NT **wrath** is not a technical term. But in 1 and 2 Thessalonians it is a technical term, that is, it always refers as Fung says, to eschatological wrath, the day of the Lord wrath. He gives 1:10 and 5:9 as evidence and we agree with the evidence. Believers are not destined for entering into the wrath, we will be removed away from the earth before the time of wrath. So 2:16 is saying that the day of the Lord's wrath has come upon the Jews in AD51. This creates the second problem.

How could the eschatological day of the Lord wrath already come upon the Jews in AD51? The verb translated **has come** in the NASB is *epthasen* used with the preposition *epi*, and it means the "to stand in anticipation," "to stand at the door", "to stand at the threshold." It has not crossed the threshold but it is ready to cross the threshold at any moment. I want to

show you a parallel with the same verb and preposition so you understand. Turn to Matt 12:28, this is Jesus and He's been demonstrating by word and works that He is the Messiah but the leadership are rejecting Him. So they've got to come up with some excuse for not accepting Him. They can't deny He's done the miracles, they can't defeat His theology. He's totally approved so they argued that He did the miracles by Satan's power. And Jesus is giving his defense that He did the miracles by the power of God. Verse 28, "But if I cast out demons by the Spirit of God, then the kingdom of God *has come upon you*." Notice the expression *has come upon you*. Same expression used in 1 Thess 2:16 of the wrath, the wrath had come upon the Jews. Now had the kingdom of God come upon them in AD33? No. But it is pictured here as at the brink of coming, it's standing at the threshold; it's ready to come if the nation Israel would receive their King. So do you feel the sense of the expression *ephthasen epi*? It means something is at the threshold of entering but it hasn't entered yet. Let's go back to 1 Thess 2:16 and I want to quote Dr Robert Thomas. Dr Thomas is one of the greatest hermeneuticians in the world. He's written many scholarly works in the conservative vein. He's commenting on 1 Thess 2:16, "Surprisingly...Paul does not use a future tense, "will come," to speak of the wrath. He uses a past tense, "has come." The unique force of the verb and preposition in that situation connoted arrival upon the threshold of fulfillment and accessible experience, *not* the entrance into that experience...the wrath that will precede [the] kingdom has already come without the Jews' full experience of it. It is at the threshold. All prerequisites for unleashing this future torrent have been met. God has set conditions in readiness through the first coming and the rejection of the Messiah by His people. A time of trouble awaits Israel just as it does the rest of the world, and the breaking forth of this time is portrayed," catch this, "the breaking forth of this time is portrayed as an "imminent condemnation" by the combination *ephthasen epi*." Look at the words "imminent condemnation." What he's saying is that the wrath coming upon Israel is imminent. What does imminent mean? It can come at any moment. "Such a potential presence of the wrath accords with the epistles emphasis on an imminent breaking forth of end-time events, one of which is the time of Israel's trouble just before the Messiah returns." The point Paul is making is that the Jews had filled up the measure of their sins by AD51 and the eschatological day of the Lord could come at-any-moment. It was at the threshold and today it remains at the threshold. They have not entered into that wrath but they can enter

into it at-any-moment. There are no warning signs that the wrath may come. In other words, it's imminent.

You say, I thought only the rapture was imminent. It seems to me, upon further reflection of the Scriptures, that several passages are suggesting that actually two events are imminent, the rapture and the wrath. Look at 5:2, "For you yourselves know full well that the day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night. ³While they are saying, "Peace and safety!" then destruction will come upon the suddenly like labor pains upon a woman with child, and they will not escape." What is Paul teaching about the coming of the day of the Lord? It "will come just like a thief in the night." Well, how does a thief come in the night? Unannounced, unexpectedly, without warning. How will the day of the Lord come? Unannounced, unexpectedly, without warning. That's the idea of imminency. So we have the rapture as imminent and we have the eschatological day of the Lord wrath as imminent. Here's Dr Thomas says, "Paul allowed no time between Christ's coming to catch away the church to Himself," that's the rapture, "and the beginning of Daniel's seventieth prophetic week, which coincides with the opening phase of the day of the Lord." Dual imminence prevails...He's saying we have two imminent events.

Now the only way you can have two imminent events is for the two events to occur simultaneously. If one must precede the other then the other is not imminent. Let's say that the rapture must occur before the day of the Lord begins. And let's diagram this. Rapture here, then the day of the Lord begins after. If that's the case then the day of the Lord cannot begin at any moment, it can only begin after the rapture. So that would mean that the day of the Lord was not imminent since imminency means it can happen at-any-moment, it's a surprise event.

So what we have in 1 Thess 2:16 is a prophetic aorist, **But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.** It had not come upon them experientially but it could come upon them at-any-moment because the nation had already filled up the measure of their sins by AD51 and the day of the Lord's wrath was at the threshold, ready to fall at-any-moment. The rapture of the church could also fall at-any-moment and therefore the two things must occur simultaneously. When the church is raptured is the moment the day of the Lord's wrath begins for the world. That's my exegetical conclusion and some

of you know that's not the position I've held before but that's the position I'm maintaining now that I've investigated some of these passages more thoroughly.

Again, this is uncharacteristic of Paul to go after the Jews like this, but it illustrates that the Gentiles were also going into this pattern of sinful rebellion like the Jews. And it's my guess, this is just a speculation, but if the wrath was at the threshold for the Jewish people by AD51 then all that we are waiting for now is the Gentile people to also reach that threshold and then the wrath will fall. Of course, no one can specify when that might be.

And therefore we have two responses to this. One, if you are an unbeliever, the proper response is to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ today and be saved. You have no time to wait because the day of the Lord wrath can come at-any-moment. Two, if you are a believer the proper response is to live each day in light of His coming for us at the rapture which can occur at-any-moment.

ⁱ Fee, G. D. (2009). *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians*. The New International Commentary on the New Testament (101). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.

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