

Study 2 God's Word Spoken and Heard

God, Front and Centre

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

Nothing could be more important to a human being than to hear what God says. But then, nothing is more intrusive and objectionable to sinful humanity than to do just that. The world seeks to mute any who presume to speak God's word, and so it happens here.

Paul must demonstrate that what happened when he came to the city was a real encounter with God—**it was not in vain**. Critics cannot get their hands on God whom they hate, but they have sought to discredit his messenger and so undermined faith in the living God. So Paul reminds them of what happened when he came to Thessalonica.

He could have pointed to the work that God had done in them, and he has touched on this in his opening comments, but he must demonstrate that he is no self-interested charlatan and talks at length about his own integrity.

God was at the centre of all he did when he came to them. He had boldness in God, spoke only the gospel or word of God (3x), was approved by God and tried to please God and has God as his witness (2x). He thanks God for their conversion and calls them to be worthy of God. He refers to those who displease God and says God's wrath has come on them at last.

We will have occasion to look at these as we proceed but it is worth noting that without God front and centre in our thinking and practice, our claims to integrity can be hollow and soon fractured. We are sinners, every bit as much as people whose allegiance is to this world, and without a God who initiates and supervises and empowers and determines the outcome of our work, we may well soon be exposed as phonies and the gospel be discredited.

Paul speaks personally with many references to 'you'—the believers—throughout most of this section. But he speaks about himself. What happened when he came to Thessalonica was real, and they know this is true. He is filling out his earlier comment that the gospel came to them in power and great conviction; they know what manner of man he had been while among them (1:5).

The section divides into two: (a) Paul declaring God's word boldly and what this looked like (vv. 1-12); (b) the believers receiving the word of Paul as God's word to them (vv. 13-16).

First, Paul was '**bold in our God**'. A beating in Philippi should have cowered him. Opposition in Thessalonica was heading in the same direction and ended in jealous Jews stirring up a mob and charging him with sedition (Acts 17:5-7). He didn't react but drew strength and grace from God to continue to live and proclaim the love of God. Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* tells us about Christian coming across a fire on which copious amounts of water was being poured. He wondered why it never went out, until Interpreter took him behind the fire and he saw oil being poured onto the fire to keep it burning brightly. As opposition to Christian faith grows in our own situation, we will need to know this unseen sustaining by grace more and more. We can be grateful that the situation in Thessalonica draws this defence from Paul so that we can be instructed in what manner of men and women Christ calls us to be.

Paul could well have chosen to be diplomatic, but, there *was* another king—Jesus! Diplomacy must still represent its jurisdiction, or rather, express the fullness of its power.

Second, the **motive** of this boldness was not heresy, or a private agenda, or desire to deceive. Calvin notes (concerning I Tim. 1:19) that ‘a bad conscience is the mother of all heresy’, and we may add, all hypocrisy and selfishness as well. Rather, Paul had been *approved*, by God (a perfect tense—past action with ongoing result). At some point known to Paul God approved him and he walked in the sureness of this. His approval began with justification. It continued with his having no other trust than Christ for his justification. God continues to test his heart and this is all that is there—faith working by love (Gal. 5:6). He did not need the glory of human approval. He even dispensed with claiming any rank as an apostle in order to make this plain. The importance of this is pressed home to us when we realise that it was seeking of human glory that killed Christ (John 7:18-19; 12:42-43). Being sure of God’s call and affection and approval is vital! So is knowing that it is all because of God’s grace! The believers know Paul has been genuine—he never used flattery among them. He was secure in God’s approval and did not need to descend to this.

God was sure of Paul’s faithfulness from the beginning because he would secure it (Acts 9:15-16; 1 Cor. 15:10; 2 Cor. 3:5; 2 Cor. 4:1). Paul refers to God’s trust in him on several occasions (1 Cor. 1:11-12; 9:17; Gal. 2:7; 1 Tim. 1:12).

If the fire of God’s love in us is a mere smoulder, our default instincts—tribal cohesion and personal safety—take over and render us ineffective, and even lethal. But Paul is ‘in God’, like the Thessalonian believers (1:1). The source of his gospel is the same as its goal—‘love, from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith’ (1 Tim. 1:5). His motive is given by God, and tested by God. The love of Christ constrains him (2 Cor. 5:14). God calls us ‘to know the love of Christ ... that [we] may be filled with all the fullness of God’ (Eph. 3:19).

Third, Paul assumed the **manner of a nursing mother** so as to care for them. The tenderness suggested by this is astonishing. A mother does not consider the worthiness of her suckling child, or withdraw affection because of irritation. Every need is sensed and addressed. If this is what these believers had needed, then that was what Paul became to them. It was not a matter of personality or gifts but of God’s love that needed to be known and the call to pastor these people. It involved sharing his whole life with the believers. What he felt, what he thought, what he knew, what he possessed, what he could do and what he hoped for were all available to them and shared as appropriate (e.g. 1 Cor. 9:22; 2 Cor. 6:11). All ministry to others must have this quality if it is to truly represent the greatness of the gospel. Among other things, this was expressed in paying his own way while he lived with them.

Fourth, he also assumed the **manner of a father**. Ever since Adam, husbands and fathers have been given responsibility for understanding God’s purpose and leading their families in this way. Paul was ‘holy, righteous and blameless’ among them, striding on to please God, and exhorting, encouraging and charging them to pursue the same way.

We should aim to be **worthy of God’s call into his coming kingdom and glory**. The Christian life is motivated by love but this love comes to us as a call to participate in a particular future. God speaks from above and we are thrust forward. Secular humanism languishes for trying to legislate love in its modern guise of tolerance but without its power and direction. The church dare not follow suit! Rather, what is needed is this spiritual fatherhood, expressed simultaneously in the intimacy and knowing affection of motherhood.

Paul now recalls the response at Thessalonica, again with thanksgiving (vv. 13-16). When Paul stood up in the Thessalonica synagogue, they knew God had spoken to them. They received **Paul’s message as God’s word because it was God’s word**. The Christ Paul knows is still talking directly, calling people to the Father. Believers have heard Christ (Eph. 4:21—‘heard him’ not about him; also Rom. 10:14, 17).

See C. K. Barrett: ‘It is right to translate strictly, “whom (not *of whom*) they have not heard”. Christ must be heard either in his own person, or in the person of his preachers, through whom his own word (v. 17) is

spoken; otherwise faith in him is impossible.' Also... 'Men call on the Lord because they believe; they believe because they hear; they hear because others preach; these preach because they are sent — by the Lord, with whom the whole process begins, as it ends with him' (on *Romans*, p. 204).

Beware anyone who says his own word is God's word (Acts 12:22-23). The New Testament itself includes a correction of one apostle by another (Gal. 2:11)! Paul learned to separate God's word from opinion (1 Cor. 7:25). But then, the future is secured by nothing less than hearing 'the word of the Lord'. It is the favourite way of referring to preaching the gospel in Acts and the growth of the church is nothing less than a growing of this word (Acts 6:7).

John Calvin wrote: 'When we have access to the preached Word, God speaks to us in a common and ordinary fashion. It is an illustration of his condescension. Hence the preaching of the Gospel is like a descent which God makes in order to seek us. We must not abuse this simplicity of the Word of God by disdain it. Rather we must receive it all the more recognising that he indeed deigns to transfigure himself, so to speak, that we might approach him' (quoted in a Tyndale Paper, July, 1986; p. 6.)

We need to beware of what we may call evangelical deism that assumes the New Testament was composed by God and then left for us to understand and make effective. This is to separate God from his word. Preachers should say nothing that is not revealed in Scripture but be equally clear that it is God or the Lord Jesus who is saying it.

Finally, Paul's boldness in speaking under pressure was matched by the boldness of the Thessalonian converts in believing under pressure. They, like Paul, have been attacked by their own people, probably local Jews.

Paul opens up the 'big picture' of how the gospel has been working from its inception: the churches belong to God; they are in Christ (perhaps meaning Christian as distinct from synagogues); they get the same treatment from those who have rejected the gospel as in Judea.

The 'big picture' continues, showing that this persecution began with Jesus himself and those who had foretold his coming. It continued with Paul being thoroughly rejected in Jerusalem. The Jews, in refusing their Messiah, though still beloved (Rom. 11:28) are displeasing to God, opposed to the wellbeing of all humanity in hindering gospel proclamation and Gentile salvation. In some way now obscure to us, Paul sees that God's wrath has come on them.

The church must always come back to this 'big picture' identity. We are called into a kingdom of which Christ is Lord. The world, be it Jewish at the time of Christ, or the nations that share in killing him (Acts 4:26-27), recognise a rival authority and move to subdue and destroy him. Lacking a Jesus in the flesh, they attack his servants. It is in this environment that the church lives and prospers (Rev. 12:1-11). The detractors of the Church's message in the West today are secular humanists of various hues. We may well see God's wrath come on them. This is not in order that we may gloat but that we may ourselves flee from the wrath to come and be thankful that we are destined for another Kingdom.