

Faith Under Fire: Thriving in a Hostile World

God at Work 1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

Introduction

“We also thank God constantly for this”—
Why? Because God is the One accomplishing
what was happening in the lives of the
Thessalonian believers. To be able to see God
at work in your life and in the lives of those
you’ve served in gospel ministry brings
thankful joy.

13 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. **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, **15** who killed both the
Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us
out, and displease God and oppose all
mankind **16** 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!

God's work in the lives of the Thessalonians was not unique to them. What Paul lays out here is consistent with God's activity in all human history to this day, including our own personal experience of the gospel of Jesus Christ. Note the categories of God's work Paul highlights:

1. Revelation: God has spoken (13).
2. Persecution: God has suffered (14-16a).
3. Vindication: God will judge (16b).

1. Revelation: God has spoken (13)

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.

Foundational to the Christian faith. *Ours is not a religion man has discovered or a religion man has created, but a religion God has revealed.* God has spoken. God has revealed what we otherwise could never know for sure. And it is God at work in the human heart that convinces us that the word of the gospel we've heard from human messengers is actually from God Himself.

The word you heard from us—the importance of gospel witness. In God's kind plan, He has

chosen for human beings to be the messengers of His Word.

The word you received—why?

The word you accepted as the word of God, not merely the word of man.

Not everyone who says they are speaking on behalf of God is actually doing so. There have always been many deceivers. Flattery, impurity, deception, greed, self-glory (verses 3-6)—these commonly infect the lives and communication of preachers and teachers who win a following for themselves. So when you hear or read teaching and preaching, here is the crucial question: *Is what is being said actually from God or not? Does it match what the Scriptures actually say?* God's Words have meaning. We dare not distort them.

Isaiah 8:20

To the teaching and to the testimony! If they will not speak according to this word, it is because they have no dawn.

The word at work in you believers—energizing, operational, making functional. God's Word has intrinsic power to bring about change in human beings who receive it.

Hebrews 4:12

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints

and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Psalm 1:2-3

² But his delight is in the law of the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.

³ He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.

John 17:15-17

¹⁵ I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. ¹⁶ They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. ¹⁷ Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth.

Acts 20:32

And now I commend you to God and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up and to give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.

God's Word active in our lives causes us to grow, to prosper, to survive a hostile world, to make it safely all the way to our eternal home, along with all the saints—those who belong to God.

Even that the Thessalonians received what the missionaries preached as God's Word at all shows God's work in them. Sinners by

birth and by choice have a natural aversion to truth from God, so how can they ever receive it?

1 Corinthians 2:14

The natural person does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they are folly to him, and he is not able to understand them because they are spiritually discerned.

1 Corinthians 2:12

Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God.

1 Corinthians 2:4-5

⁴ And my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

Romans 10:14-17

¹⁴ How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? ¹⁵ And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, "How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!" ¹⁶ But they have not all obeyed the gospel. For Isaiah says, "Lord,

who has believed what he has heard from us?" ¹⁷ So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.

Application:

When you hear the Word of God preached, are you receiving it for what it is, the very word of God, not just of men?

Absolute truth you can rely on. Intrinsic power. Accountability for what you do with it.

What are some practical ways we treat it as God's Word?

If you're teaching or preaching it, put in the time and effort to ensure you're not distorting what it says. Pay attention to the words.

Explain them. Apply them. Keep the passage connected to the overall gospel message of the Bible. Don't leave Jesus out. There's no gospel without Him.

Prioritize the scheduled times God's Word is to be delivered to you. You can't take the Word in well if you don't show up or if you're too sleepy to pay attention. If you choose to stay up into the wee hours of the morning, your choice to do so reveals you value your computer games or whatever else you're doing when you ought to be sleeping more than being able to concentrate when you hear the Word. Sometimes we don't have a choice about adequate sleep to function well, but most of the time we do.

Pray before you read or listen to the Word, that God will open your heart and mind to what's there.

Take notes so you can focus better and so that you can meditate later on what you've heard in the moment.

Commit to living in obedience to what you've received.

*Talk about what you've heard with others—*even before you meet with your LifeGroup. Start with family and close friends.

2. Persecution: God has suffered (14-16a).

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,

Imitators of the churches of God . . . for you suffered.

Suffering for sake of the gospel is a hallmark of genuine believers. All that want to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

The churches in Judea suffered it from the Jews who rejected Jesus. At one time Paul

was among the rejectors. So there's hope even for them.

We know from Acts that it was the jealous Jews who stirred up the crowd against the Thessalonian believers, but here we realize that the mistreatment went beyond that. Their own countrymen attacked them. The rabble in the marketplace. The legal authorities. And evidently the pressure continued from the community at large.

They were Greeks from a privileged city, but their newfound faith in Jesus Christ brought accusations against them as dangerous rebels to their city and the empire. They had engaged in no violence or sedition, but what they had come to believe was completely contrary to the philosophy and culture of the Greeks and Romans. To the Greeks the preaching of the cross was foolishness. Same with the Romans. Who worships a crucified Savior?

The gospel confronted as evil long-standing pagan practices of the Greco-Roman world. It proclaimed one God not many, and one Savior who rose physically from the dead and promised the same for His followers. It redefined how family life was to function (as we will see tonight in Ephesians 5). It upended an honor culture where the proud

and the strong succeed and the weak are despised, ignored, and abused.

In describing the sinful behavior of the unbelieving Jews, Paul reveals that there was a reason deeper yet for the violent hatred they endured.

1 Thessalonians 2:15-16a

15 who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind **16a** by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved.

The mistreatment directed against the believers in Thessalonica was rooted in hatred for the Lord Jesus. They killed Him. And they killed the prophets sent by God to them. They drove out the apostles sent by Jesus. The core hostility is against God Himself. That is why evil people mistreat those who belong to God. They don't care about bringing God pleasure. They want to bring Him pain. They resent His rule over them. They reject His authority. They see Him as a cosmic bully, holding them back from indulging their appetites however they desire.

John 15:18-25

18 "If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before it hated you. **19** If you were of the world, the world would love you as its

own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you. ²⁰ Remember the word that I said to you: 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will also persecute you. If they kept my word, they will also keep yours. ²¹ But all these things they will do to you on account of my name, because they do not know him who sent me. ²² If I had not come and spoken to them, they would not have been guilty of sin, but now they have no excuse for their sin. ²³ Whoever hates me hates my Father also. ²⁴ If I had not done among them the works that no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin, but now they have seen and hated both me and my Father. ²⁵ But the word that is written in their Law must be fulfilled: 'They hated me without a cause.'

Philippians 3:10

That I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death.

God himself suffers the hatred of mankind. He has done so ever since the Garden of Eden. He suffers the hatred of Satan and his demons. Those who believe Satan's lies instead of God's Word align with the evil one and do his murderous work. Jesus, God the Son in the flesh, has suffered the violence of humanity's hatred against God. When we

suffer for Jesus, we are not alone. He has walked this road first. And He suffers along with us. Jesus confronted Paul before he was converted with these words, "Why are you persecuting me?" Jesus took personally the mistreatment Paul was directing against Christians. And He still does.

Sin is always harmful, so this disregard for God ends up harming their fellow human beings, both saved and unsaved. They not only reject the truth. They hate those who believe it. And they don't want anyone else to believe it.

Oppose all mankind ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved.

The reality is that *when we oppose God, we oppose human beings, including ourselves. All human beings are created in God's image with the capacity and the inborn need to know Him and love Him and worship Him. We can never be complete and whole apart from Him. But our sin and rebellion stand in the way. Christ came to break that Satanic tyranny passed down upon us from our first parents Adam and Eve when they listened to the serpent and his lying assault against God.*

People think they are free when they declare independence from God. They think they are

doing a good thing to persuade others to do the same. But they are not free. All they've done is give themselves over to the arch-enemy of God, Satan himself. They are his slaves, and they do what their evil master dictates. The Lord loves His servants and rewards them in this life and the next. Satan uses and abuses his slaves, destroying them and discarding them, and finding pleasure in their pain and destruction. Which Master do you want?

Whatever mistreatment you endure because of your love for Jesus, you are marking yourself as genuine, one in whom God is at work. It's like a birthmark that reveals you are God's child. So don't cave to the evil. Don't reshape the gospel to fit the lies of the times.

We need not fear the trouble. It's not worth comparing with the shining splendor that will be yours when you enter your inheritance.

3. Vindication: God will judge (16b)

So as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!

God is keeping record of the wrongs done against you. *No one gets away with anything. Either Jesus pays for it because you're relying on His sacrifice for your sins to free you from*

their guilt, or you will pay for them yourself. Every last one.

How many think they can lie and cheat and steal with no consequence. That they can tear others apart with their words and God does not hear. That they can take advantage of others and God does not notice. That they can express hatred for the truth and those that follow it and no one will call them to account for it.

Sometimes believers fret that those that hate and mistreat them are getting off scot free. Sometimes Christian adopt a hostile spirit toward those who are hostile to them and try to even the score. It is not necessary.

Romans 12:14-21

14 Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. **15** Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep. **16** Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. **17** Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all. **18** If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all. **19** Beloved, never avenge yourselves, but leave it to the wrath of God, for it is written, "Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord." **20** To the contrary, "if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him

something to drink; for by so doing you will heap burning coals on his head.” ²¹ Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.

Paul says these enemies of God and His people are filling up the measure of their sins. They are filling up the cup of God’s wrath that will be poured on them. Unless they throw themselves on the mercy of Jesus there is no escape from it.

Wrath has come upon them at last! Paul uses a verb tense that points to completed action. May refer to sufferings God brings to bear on His enemies through the ups and downs of history. He does that, as the Biblical record shows.

Romans 1:18

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

The verb tense could also communicate that the enemies of God of whom he speaks have crossed the point of no return. Their sentence has been sealed. We don’t know when we’ve crossed that line. But God does.

Another possibility is that Paul uses this tense to underscore that the wrath of God against

such rebels to His gospel is so sure that it's as good as done.

For instance, Romans 8:28-30

28 And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

29 For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. **30** And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.

The outcome is sure. Your destiny is either glory or wrath. It's all connected to the gospel of Jesus Christ. You receive Him or you reject Him. You are heaping up Divine reward or you are heaping up Divine punishment. There is no middle ground. If you belong to Jesus, you need not worry. You need not fret. No matter what you suffer now. Vindication is coming.

Conclusion

God is at work. For that we are forever grateful.

1. Revelation: God has spoken (13).
2. Persecution: God has suffered (14-16a).
3. Vindication: God will judge (16b).

Closing Song: Glorious Light

Discussion Questions

1. What are some examples of when you saw God at work in your life or in the lives of people you know, and what effect did those times have on you?
2. What are some practical ways you have found help you benefit the most from the Scripture you read and hear?
3. Given the natural state of human beings, why should it be no surprise if people hate and mistreat followers of Jesus?
4. How is it helpful to remember that Jesus Himself suffered hostility and predicted we would too?
5. Why does hostility toward God and the gospel do harm to unbelievers as well as to believers?
6. How does knowing that God is fully aware of and will surely deal with every wrong done keep us from adopting a spirit of hostility toward those who mistreat us?
7. Why is the reality of God's wrath against sinners a necessary component of the gospel?