

April 11, 2010

Living in the Light of Christ's Return

Receiving the Word of God

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20

I don't know if you really thought about it this morning, but you have taken a tremendous risk in coming here today. There is the very real possibility that the word of God will ambush you as you listen and break through all the defenses you have built up against Him and draw you into the light and utterly transform your life. *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.* Hebrews 4:12 I wouldn't be preaching if I didn't believe this with all my heart and mind and soul and strength. The word of God conveys the power of God that will change your living and your thinking and your motives and your affections – irrevocably and eternally. I am praying for that to happen – not only for you, but also for me. Would you pray with me?

Gracious Father,

We come just as we are this morning – trusting in Your grace and the power of Your Word to penetrate our hearts and minds. O how we love Your Word, Father. It is precious beyond all the things of this earthly plain and all its temporal treasures. Incline our hearts to this Word and break our bondage to other things. Let us see Your form and face and beauty in it today. Pierce through our souls and waken spiritual life. Confirm the substance of our faith and make us real, through and through. For those who are aching with sorrow, may this Word be a healing balm and fierce comfort. For those who are rejoicing may this Word increase and broaden their joy. For those who have wandered away from You may this Word draw their hearts and affections once more into Your presence. For those who have surrendered to the awful tyranny of sin may this Word set them free and inspire faith. For those who come with cold and stony hearts may this Word ignite a fire and passion and love for You that many waters cannot quench. O Father, let Your Word deliver us today from every other attachment and affection into the awesome brilliance and beauty of Your love, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ, the Living Word, Amen.

Both Nick and Roger did excellent work in expounding the first half of this chapter, so I just want to remind you of a few things to put this in perspective. Paul spends the first few verses of chapter two defending his character and ministry against some charges that were laid by his opponents. He didn't do this because he felt insecure or doubtful about his ministry, or even I believe, because the Thessalonians were suspicious or doubtful, but rather to set the record straight and remind the Thessalonians of the truth of things. The enemies of the gospel took the opportunity of his rather abrupt departure from Thessalonica to level a host of charges against him.

They were claiming that he was a criminal and was therefore untrustworthy: *But though we had already suffered and been shamefully treated at Philippi, as you know, we had boldness in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in the midst of much conflict.* Philippians 2:2 They were saying 'Paul is delusional, his ministry is based on impure motives and he is deliberately deceptive': *For our appeal does not spring from error or impurity or any attempt to deceive'* Philippians 2:3 They claimed he was a 'man-pleaser' – preaching to please men and not God: *but just as we have been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak, not to please man, but to please God who tests our hearts.* Philippians 2:4

They said that all he was after was money: *For we never came with words of flattery, as you know, nor with a pretext for greed--God is witness...For you remember, brothers, our labor and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.* Philippians 2:5,9 And that he was a glory-hound: *Nor did we seek glory from people, whether from you or from others, though we could have made demands as apostles of Christ.* Philippians 2:6 Finally they charged him with being something of a dictator: *But we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us.* Philippians 2:7-8 He concludes his defense by saying: *You are witnesses, and God also, how holy and righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers. For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.* Philippians 2:10-12

Paul was not concerned that the Thessalonians believed these slanderous lies – but he also did not want the lies to have room to grow in his absence. Remember he was writing this from Corinth. **His confidence was ultimately grounded, however, in God and in His word that he had ministered to the saints while he was in Thessalonica.** And so the rest of this chapter is given over to increasing thanksgiving to God for the way the Thessalonians had **received** the word and embraced it. *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.* 1 Thessalonians 2:13

There are two Greek words used here to receive or accept: *you received the word of God... you **accepted** it.* The first is a receiving that comes through hearing, and the second is embracing or welcoming that word that is heard into your heart. **We not only need to be under the hearing of the word of God – but we also need to embrace it.** That is we need to take it to heart, let it penetrate, let it work in us, wrap our arms around it and let it have its effect. The word of God comes to us objectively – and it is the word of God whether we accept it or not. There is a movement in Christianity to redefine this concept to say that the word of man, which this was through Paul, only becomes the word of God when and if we accept it as such. But Paul says, that the word he preached was really the word of God – objectively – quite apart from the Thessalonians acceptance of that word. **Our acceptance does not make it the word of God – we accept it because it is the word of God.** We wrap our arms around it and embrace it and take it to heart.

And when that happens, **the word of God works in you.** That is what Paul says, *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.* We have a choice this morning as we sit under the hearing of the word – we can embrace this word, or we can reject this word. Just listening is not enough. The writer of Hebrews warns the Christians that just hearing the word of God is not enough. He points back to the rebellious Israelites during the time of Moses and says: *For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also ; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by [or mixed with] faith in those who heard* Hebrews 4:2 That is, **the word of God that came to them was not acted upon.** That is what it means to mix the word with faith.

In the gospel of Luke, Jesus is once again teaching his disciples some truths – this time about stumbling blocks and repentance. And He concludes His teaching with this admonition: *Be on your guard ! If your brother sins, rebuke him; and if he repents, forgive him. "And if he sins against you seven times a day, and returns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' forgive him."* Luke 17:3-4 And the disciples' response to this was *"Increase our faith !"* Luke 17:5 It was as though they saw the utter impossibility of being able to forgive their brother seven times in one day. 'Once is hard enough – but do we have to forgive that wretch seven times in one day – maybe even for the same thing? O Lord, what we need is more faith!'

But Jesus' answer I think, takes them off guard. In response to their plea for more faith – He tells them this little story: *And the Lord said, "If you had faith like a mustard seed, you would say to this mulberry tree, 'Be uprooted and be planted in the sea ' ; and it would obey you. "Which of you, having a slave plowing or tending sheep, will say to him when he has come in from the field, 'Come immediately and sit down to eat'? "But will he not say to him, 'Prepare something for me to eat, and properly clothe yourself and serve me while I eat and drink; and afterward you may eat and drink ' ? "He does not thank the slave because he did the things which were commanded, does he? "So you too, when you do all the things which are commanded you, say, 'We are unworthy slaves ; we have done only that which we ought to have done.' "* Luke 17:6 – 10.

Essentially Jesus tells them, **'What you need is not more faith but more radical obedience'**. He wasn't giving them the secret of magical tree transportation. He was using hyperbolic language to press home an important point: Even the smallest amount of faith can achieve incredible results – especially a miracle like forgiving your brother seven times in one day. **Because faith is action – doing what God has said regardless of how you feel. Faith is stepping out boldly on the basis of the promises of God with radical obedience to His commandments.** The slave in this story, if you asked him privately, probably didn't feel like serving the master his dinner first. I'm sure he was tired, hot, sweaty, and hungry after a hard day's work – no doubt looking forward to a shower and a good hot meal. I'm sure he felt like telling the master to take a hike and get his own dinner. But the point of the story is that he is a slave who must do what the master orders whether he feels like it or not. And if we belong to Christ – the word we hear must be mixed with faith – **must be mixed with radical obedience.** And when that happens, the word of God works in us to transform us more and more into the image of Christ.

The main objective of the working of God's word in us is the transformation of our minds. Our behavior, good or bad, is directly tied to how we think. It is a product of our world view. It is the result of what we believe to be true about things. Our minds have been corrupted and misled by the sin that indwells us and they need to be renewed to the truth of God's word. Paul's prayer for the Ephesians was that they would be renewed in the spirit of their minds so that they could *'...put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth.'* Ephesians 4:22-23 How we think directly affects how we act. And that is why we need to embrace the word of God – let it move in our hearts, linger in our minds, saturate our thinking.

Paul knew that the Thessalonians had received and embraced his gospel message to them because their lives reflected the truth: *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,* 1 Thessalonians 2:14 The fact that their lives reflected the same grace of suffering that the rest of the churches in Judea had proved that as Paul says in verse 1 of this chapter: *For you yourselves know, brothers, that our coming to you was not in vain.* 1 Thessalonians 2:1. That is, **the gospel message had been received and embraced to the extent that their lives reflected that massive change the gospel makes in converted souls.** The fact that they were suffering the same persecution that others who had received the gospel proved that they had really embraced the word of Paul as the word of God.

Persecution and suffering come into our lives in order to prove the word of God in us. Nothing proves the truth of the gospel more than the testimony of those who are willing to endure shame and suffering and unjust accusations and the unrighteous behavior of the enemies of the gospel for the sake of the gospel. It is **crucial to your endurance in the faith** to embrace this truth. If you are a Christian, or if you are considering becoming a Christian, you need to know what the word of the Lord promises to those who follow Him. *Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.* 2 Timothy 3:12 Persecution is one of the means through which God refines His people, judges unrighteousness, exposes the enemy, and accomplishes His purpose in the world. Jesus told His disciples right before His crucifixion: *"Remember the word that I said to you, 'A slave is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also* John 15:20

And these Thessalonians endured the same kind of persecution Jesus did, Paul did, all the disciples did, and the churches did. It came from those *who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind* 1 Thessalonians 2:15 And this hasn't changed in two thousand years. Persecution always comes from those who have the same kind of spirit that put Jesus to death and killed God's prophets – who are displeasing to God and oppose all mankind. The ironic thing is that those who persecute Christians think that they are pleasing whatever God they serve, just like the religious Jews of Jesus' day. **They oppose mankind because their opposition seeks to drown out the call of the gospel to a dying human race and so their opposition actually works against what would be mankind's highest good and greatest joy.**

That is what Paul says, *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 God's wrath has come upon them at last!* 1 Thessalonians 2:16 Here is a curious phrase that Paul puts in relation to those who oppose the gospel: *so as always to fill up the measure of their sins.* What does that mean? What it assumes is that there is a measure of sin that God in His sovereign wisdom determines to allow until it reaches a certain measure, and then He deals with it. It is as though God sets boundaries to every man's wickedness – allowing them to continue in that sin until they have filled up the measure and then executes judgment. Jesus told those opposing Him in the gospel of Matthew: *"So you testify against yourselves, that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. "Fill up, then, the measure of the guilt of your fathers.* Matthew 23:31-32

We see this principle set out in Genesis 15, where God is making a covenant with Abram and ends with this word: *God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years. "But I will also judge the nation whom they will serve, and afterward they will come out with many possessions. "As for you, you shall go to your fathers in peace ; you will be buried at a good old age. "Then in the fourth generation they will return here, for the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete."* Genesis 15:13-16 In other words, God had set a measure of sin that would take over four hundred years to fill up. The word **complete** comes from a root word meaning **'to be at peace with'**. This word is directly connected with the idea of being friendly with someone or something.. The concept here, is that when a society is at peace with or friendly with sin, at that point it is subject to judgment from God. **Sin is no longer shameful or disgraceful and God will tolerate it no longer.**

So when Paul writes that these opposing Jews always fill up the measure of their sins – and then says that God's wrath has come upon them, **he was saying that the cup of their iniquity was finally full and God had determined to bring judgment against them.** These were the guys that opposed Jesus when He walked the earth – always trying to devise means to discredit Him, to marginalize His message, and to kill Him. They finally put Him to death on the cross and when that didn't stop Him, they went after His church. They were bent on obstructing God's purpose and destroying His work. They had got to the point that they were friends with sin – shameless and blatant. But these were those who should have been on the other side of things. They knew the Torah – they knew the Scriptures. But they had only received without embracing and as a consequence were lost.

Bible teachers have argued over whether or not this judgment referred to the coming destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. But if that were the case Paul probably wouldn't have spoken of the wrath of God in the perfect tense – has come – he would have spoken in future tense – will come. Some think that he is speaking of God's general wrath that comes upon everyone who rejects Jesus – but again, Paul is very specific here – has come. Some even postulate that this refers to the future tribulation period in which God will judge the unbelieving Jews spoken of in Jeremiah 30. But the fact that Paul uses the emphatic perfect tense indicates that this is a wrath that has come at some point in the past and is continuing on.

In Acts chapter 13, Paul and Barnabas were on their first mission trip into Asia Minor and came to Pisidian Antioch and he and Barnabas were teaching in the synagogue for several Sabbaths. And we read in verse 45: *But when the Jews saw the crowds, they were filled with jealousy and began contradicting the things spoken by Paul, and were blaspheming.* Acts 13:45 So Paul and Barnabas spoke up: *"It was necessary that the word of God be spoken to you first ; since you repudiate it and judge yourselves unworthy of eternal life, behold, we are turning to the Gentiles.* Acts 13:45 I think it may have been at that point that God said, 'Enough. Since you reject Me and continue in your sin by not believing in Me – My wrath against sin cannot be held back'. And the wrath of God was in turning away from the Jews as a people, to create for Himself a unique body of believers made up of both believing Jew and Gentile.

They found themselves in the exact place Esau found himself after he despised and rejected his birth right. The writer tells us that *For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.* Hebrews 12:17 This is one way the wrath of God is visited upon those who repeatedly reject Him – **they cannot repent even if they wanted to.** And that is a terrible place to be. Proverbs 6 tells us: *A worthless person, a wicked man, is the one who walks with a perverse mouth, who winks with his eyes, who signals with his feet, who points with his fingers; who with perversity in his heart continually devises evil, who spreads strife. Therefore his calamity will come suddenly ; instantly he will be broken and there will be no healing.* Proverbs 6:12-15

These people who had heard Jesus speak, saw the miracles He performed, knew the Scriptures about the coming Messiah, who continually hardened their hearts and did not embrace the Christ who was the living word, eventually found themselves in a place with no repentance under the wrath of God. Jesus had told them *"You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life ; it is these that testify about Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me so that you may have life."* John 5:39-40 In other words, they had received by hearing the word of God but they had not mixed that hearing with obedient faith and embraced the truth of what they heard. Their hearing changed nothing in their lives because they did not accept it into their hearts.

So what should we do? How should we embrace the word that we have heard? What are the means of accepting the word so that it does its transforming work in our lives? I want to give you in conclusion, three little words that will help you: **Meditate – Memorize – Mind.** First of all, we not only hear the word of God, we must meditate over it. Linger longer in the word. Let it flow through your mind and heart and soul. Savor the richness of God's promises, taste and see that the Lord is good. Read it, ponder it, think through the implications of it, let it wash through you, let it be the focus of your thoughts throughout the day. Ask God to make it alive to you, to apply it to your life and thoughts and actions. Psalm 1 says: *How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, Nor stand in the path of sinners, Nor sit in the seat of scoffers ! But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night.* Psalm 1:1-2 Someone has said that Bibles that are falling apart usually belong to people who are NOT.

Secondly, memorize the word. Psalm 119 says: *Your word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against You.* Psalm 119:11 Memorizing the word of God will help you triumph over sin. John tells us that with the word of God abiding in us, we triumph over Satan and his schemes: *I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and you have overcome the evil one.* 1 John 2:14b Memorized Scripture gives power and impact to our prayers. If you do not memorize the word, you find yourself praying weak, insipid, clichéd prayers that don't even reach the ceiling. Memorizing the word of God helps us to pray according to His will.

Finally, we need to mind the word. That is we need to obey what we have read and meditated over and memorized in order to put it into action. Do you love God? Do you really love God? If you love Him you will obey Him. *By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments ; and His commandments are not burdensome.* 1 John 5:2-3 This morning, I urge you by the mercies of God to not only be those who hear the word but embrace it.

Our gracious and good Father above,

May we be those who not only receive Your word but accept it with the fierce embrace of love and adoration. May it penetrate the walls we have raised against it and shatter our defenses. Give us we pray, an unquenchable thirst and hunger for the deep delights in Your word and let it inspire an obedient allegiance to Your truth. Where there is no hunger for Your word, give appetite and desire. Where there is no cherishing or savoring of the good things of God, waken the taste buds of our souls. Forgive us for stuffing our minds and hearts and souls with the empty promises of sin and the ruinous delights of the world. Give us a heart to meditate and linger over the gracious words of life in Your word. Spur us on to memorize and obey it, and treasure it above every other thing in this life. Let Your word be honey on our tongues so that we would be the most radical followers of Christ, delighting in God through Jesus Christ, spreading His joy through the gospel to all people, we pray in the precious and powerful name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.