

Sermon

The Energizing Power of the Word of God (1 Thess. 2:13-16)

Pastor Jerry Truex; July 3, 2011

A. Introduction

We continue our series on 1 Thessalonians. Today we look at what is called Paul's second thanksgiving in 2:13-16. But before we do that, let me just remind you of what Paul has said so far.

Paul is addressing the Thessalonians, Greek Christians, who are without leaders and who are experiencing persecution. Paul is writing to them because he cannot join them at the moment, because he himself is being prevented by people who oppose his work.

Nevertheless, Paul writes to encourage the Thessalonians. He's proud of them because they embraced his message of obedience to the God of Jesus Christ, when he was with them at an early time. Paul has heard through the rumor mill that the Thessalonians are keeping the faith; they have turned from idol worship, and are now worshiping and serving the one true God (1:9). He's even heard that they are in fact imitating Paul (1:6). He says he feels like a proud mother (2:7) and is determined to share his own life with them (2:8).

This brings us to our text.

B. The Word of God (2:13)

¹³ We also constantly give thanks to God for this, that when you received the word of God that you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word but as what it really is, God's word, which is also at work in you believers.

¹³ Καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καὶ ἡμεῖς εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ ἀδιαλείπτως, ὅτι παραλαβόντες λόγον ἀκοῆς παρ' ἡμῶν τοῦ θεοῦ ἐδέξασθε οὐ λόγον ἀνθρώπων ἀλλὰ καθὼς ἐστὶν ἀληθῶς λόγον θεοῦ, ὃς καὶ ἐνεργεῖται ἐν ὑμῖν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν.

1. Giving thanks

First, notice what Paul says in verse 13: "We constantly give thanks for you to God," εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ. Being thankful to God is a repeated theme of 1 Thessalonians.

Three times in 1 Thessalonians Paul says he is thankful to God. Each time he gives thanks for the Thessalonians steadfastness and loyalty to the Word that Paul had preached to them (1:2-3; 2:13; 3:9-10).

Each of these thanksgivings builds up to a climax in 5:18, where Paul says, "Give thanks in all circumstances, for that is the will of God."

^{5:18} ἐν παντὶ εὐχαριστεῖτε· τοῦτο γὰρ θέλημα θεοῦ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ εἰς ὑμᾶς.

^{5:18} in everything give thank; for this [is] the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (JT)

I would bet that everyone here knows the value of giving thanks to God. In every circumstance—from losing a loved one to gaining a new family member—we know that *hidden within* any event that presents itself to our consciousness, we can find something to thank God for.

And when we thank God, our feelings of alienation or separation from God—even our hostility toward God—are reduced or eliminated. Thankfulness is the quickest way to generate positive emotions.

Being thankful connects us with God. It aligns us with God's will and God's power. It gives us divine light and a new perspective. Being thankful—which is a type of prayer—is, in my view, not only the most basic, but also the most important spiritual discipline.

2. God's Word

What does Paul give thanks for? He is thankful that the Thessalonians received the Word of God.

a. What does the Word of God refer to?

The question is what does the Word of God refer to? Earlier in 1 Thessalonians, Paul refers to:

- The message of the gospel (1:5; 2:5)
- The word of the Lord/God (1:8; 2:13)
- The gospel of God (2:2, 8, 9)

So if these terms correlate, then the *word of God* is related to the message or the content of the Gospel. Clearly, Paul has something specific in mind, but 1 Thessalonians doesn't tell us what the message was about.

Last week, Lois stressed that the term "gospel" had strong political overtones. On the one hand, the gospel refers to message of Isaiah that YHWH, the God of Israel,

would return to Zion to judge evil and redeem the children of God. On the other hand, the word “gospel” in the ancient Roman world referred to the celebration of the accession of a Caesar or the military victory the Emperor. It was a call of allegiance and obedience to Caesar. When Paul announces the Gospel of God, he is not talking about how an individual can “get to heaven,” but about allegiance and obedience we own to “another king” besides Caesar.

Based on my reading of Paul—especially Romans—I would summarize the message of the Gospel like this (100 words):

God is faithful to the human race. God loves human beings and has not given up on them. Throughout human history in all cultures, God has been working a plan to restore human beings and set them free from evil. God’s plan has come to a climax in the coming of the Messiah Jesus.

The life, death, and resurrection of God’s Messiah shows that God loves, forgives, and accepts all people and, more than that, God restores humanity to health, wholeness, justice, peace, and righteousness. To partake in God’s plan, people must repent and learn from and imitate God’s Messiah.

b. How did the Thessalonians respond?

How did the Thessalonians respond to Paul’s message? What did the Thessalonians do? How did they react? They responded in two ways.

First, they received it. The word for “received” is *paralambanō* (παραλαμβάνω). *Paralambanō* refers to *taking something to oneself, to take along, to take over, to take responsibility for*; sometimes it means *to take into custody* or *to arrest*. They received Paul’s message. They did not ignore it, leave it behind, or distort it. They received it.

Second, the Thessalonians heard God’s word in and through human words.

- On a *literal level*, “the word” (logos) refers to human speech, Paul’s message.
- On a *metaphorical level*, “the word” (logos)—which transcends human speech entirely—refers to the revelation of God, the divine encounter for humans, God’s power and Spirit (1:5). In this way, the Thessalonians encountered the Divine Logos through the human logos.

c. How did the Word affect the Thessalonians?

How did the Word affect the Thessalonians? That is, what happened to the Thessalonians? Look at the end of verse 13d:

God's word, which is at work in you believers." (NRSV)

λόγον θεοῦ, ὃς καὶ ἐνεργεῖται ἐν ὑμῖν τοῖς πιστεύουσιν.

Word of God, which is also *continually being worked in/among* you believers (JT)

Notice that God's Word is doing something. It's active. It's working. It's performing an action on the Thessalonians. The phrase, "is at work," is Greek word *energeō* (ἐνεργέω). *Energeō* is a verb and means work, produce, and operate. From this word we get energize, energy, energetic.

So the Word of God energized the Thessalonians. The verb is also in the present tense (middle), so it means the Thessalonians are *continually being energized* by the Word of God.

Earlier, Paul said that the message of the Gospel came not only in human words, "but in power and in the Holy Spirit"—ἐν δυνάμει καὶ ἐν πνεύματι ἁγίῳ (1:5). The Word and the Spirit are always correlated.

Col. 3:16. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. (NRSV)

Eph. 5:18-19. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts. (NRSV)

These passages make it clear that *the word of God* is not primarily information about God and Jesus. There is a message with content as I mentioned; but *the word of God* is not propositional truth that can be organized in a theological manual. Rather, *the word of God* is a dynamic power which transform and energizes believers.¹

d. Excursus: The four uses of "Word of God"

It is helpful to recall that "the Word of God" has four references in Christian tradition.

- (1) Eternal Word, which is a way to talk about God as the personification of Divine wisdom that creates, pervades, sustains, and governs the universe.
- (2) Jesus, who is identified as the Word made flesh (John 1:14)
- (3) Scriptures, which expresses the Wisdom or Word of God in written form
- (4) Preaching, which is the human word about God's purposes for humanity through Jesus, which is accompanied by God's Spirit

Let's move to the next paragraph.

¹ Jacob W. Elias, 1 and 2 Thessalonians, BCBC (Scottsdale: Herald, 1995)83-4.

B. Persecution

¹⁴ For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you suffered the same things from your own compatriots as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵ who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone ¹⁶ by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. Thus they have constantly been filling up the measure of their sins; but God's wrath has overtaken them at last.

¹⁴ ὑμεῖς γὰρ μιμηταὶ ἐγενήθητε, ἀδελφοί, τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν τοῦ θεοῦ τῶν οὐσῶν ἐν τῇ Ἰουδαίᾳ ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, ὅτι τὰ αὐτὰ ἐπάθετε καὶ ὑμεῖς ὑπὸ τῶν ἰδίων συμφυλετῶν καθὼς καὶ αὐτοὶ ὑπὸ τῶν Ἰουδαίων, ¹⁵ τῶν καὶ τὸν κύριον ἀποκτεινάντων Ἰησοῦν καὶ τοὺς προφήτας καὶ ἡμᾶς ἐκδιωξάντων καὶ θεῷ μὴ ἀρεσκόντων καὶ πᾶσιν ἀνθρώποις ἐναντίων, ¹⁶ κωλύόντων ἡμᾶς τοῖς ἔθνεσιν λαλῆσαι ἵνα σωθῶσιν, εἰς τὸ ἀναπληρῶσαι αὐτῶν τὰς ἀμαρτίας πάντοτε. ἔφθασεν δὲ ἐπ' αὐτοὺς ἡ ὀργὴ εἰς τέλος.

1. Anti-Jewish?

Verses 14-16 have been the subject of much controversy because of the apparent anti-Jewish tone.²

However, if you notice, Paul is not criticizing *all* Jews, just *some* Jews. Paul says that *some* Jews—namely, the ones who persecuted Jesus and his followers—have displeased God. So any attempt to pinpoint God's wrath (v. 16) as directed against all Jews misrepresents what Paul is saying.

Remember that Jesus, Paul, and the earliest followers of Jesus were, of course, all Jews. So verses 14-16 reflect an "in-house" debate among Jews. It's clear that some Jews in Judea, who followed Jesus as the Messiah, were persecuted by other Jews, who did not think Jesus was the Messiah.

In fact, the phrase, "filling up constantly (πάντοτε) the measure of their sins" was a typical lament that some Jews used to express their outrage at the faithlessness of other Jews.³

What is often missed in reading 2:14-16 is Paul's characterization of the relentless opposition of some Jews *against* the Jewish followers of Jesus in Judea.

Paul lists their offenses in 2:15 and at the end of the list says,

² Some have even suggested that it is an interpolation by a later scribe. Frank Gilliard, "The Problem of the Anti-Semitic Comma between 1 Thessalonians 2:14 and 15," *NTS* 35 (1989) 481-502, as cited by Abraham Smith, *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Volume XI (Nashville: Abingdon, 2000) 703.

³ Beverly R. Gaventa, *First and Second Thessalonians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Know, 1998) 37.

3:16 "they have constantly (πάντοτε) been filling up the measure of their sins."

3:16 εἰς τὸ ἀναπληρῶσαι αὐτῶν τὰς ἀμαρτίας πάντοτε.

So Paul characterizes the opposition to Jewish Christians in Judea as obsessive, ongoing, and relentless.

2. What is Paul's point?

What is Paul's point? Why does Paul raise the issue of persecution of Jewish Christians in Judea with a bunch of Greek Christians in Thessaloniki?

Paul is making an analogy. *Just as* the Jewish Christians in Judea have experience ongoing persecution and remained faithful to God, *so also* the Greek Christians in Thessaloniki have experienced persecution and remained faithful (1:6).

He tells them, "You are imitators (μιμηταὶ ἐγενήθητε) of the Judean Christians" (2:14). In matters of discipleship, being an imitation is not a bad thing. Several times in 1 Thessalonians the idea of imitation comes up. The Thessalonians imitated Paul (1:6). The Thessalonians were examples (*τυποὶ*) for other Christians in Macedonia and Achaia (1:8), and now Paul says the Gentile Christians are imitating the Jewish Christians. It all goes back to the notion of following Jesus, which is to walk as he walked, to imitate Christ.

So the Thessalonians are imitating the steadfast endurance in the face of opposition to their faith. Persecution and opposition to Christians in the first century was relentless, but so was the faithfulness of Christians, whether Jews and Gentile.

What is often missed when considering this passage is that the Jewish Christians in Judea survived, even with the loss of their leaders—they were either killed (Jesus, Stephen, James) or driven out (Paul and Barnabas).

Similarly, the Greek believers in Thessaloniki are without leaders (as Paul will note in 3:6), but they survive, a sign that "God's word ... is at work in you who believe" (2:13).

C. Conclusions

In this brief paragraph, Paul focused on two of the most important and foundational spiritual practices: Giving thanks and receiving the Word of God.

Both giving thanks and receiving the Word results in spiritual power. Both accelerate spiritual growth and awareness. Both are connected to the imitation of Christ. Both

build character. And, as this text shows, both thankfulness and receiving the Word energize people to remain faithful no matter the circumstances.