

HEARING GOD'S WORD

1Thessalonians 2:13-16

BPC 5pm Service – 21/2/2021

I'm a big fan of the quiz show called the Chase and to my surprise, questions about the bible occur quite frequently. And whoever comes up with the questions for this show clearly went to Sunday school as almost all the questions are answered with Jesus, or sometimes Moses for a bit of diversity.

And I think this really stands out to me because it is one of the few times the bible gets a look in or is even mentioned in mainstream media. And what is more, it's treated as just a subject of general knowledge. Which really is both rare and surprising.

And it comes as a stark contrast the heated language of our premier who described the sexual ethics of the bible as hate-filled, bigoted quackery that has no place in our society. From history and general interest on the one hand to dangerous or harmful on the other. It's quite a spectrum of opinion.

But as I thought about this I noticed that there is quite a spectrum of attitude and engagement even within the church or amongst Christians. As the bible reading begins there will be some who are enthusiastically flicking pages and getting their pens out because God is about to speak.

For others, the bible reading and sermon is the time to fold arms, slump into the chair, and reflect on the days activities or stare at our shoes or even get in that power nap. In fact when I was preaching at a church in the country once, even though the sermon directly followed a song, the 12 seconds it took me to move from my chair to the lectern, an older gentleman had already fallen asleep!

And for many of us who have been in church for a while and sat through a number of bible talks, we know we have occasionally fluctuated between these extremes of excitement and exhaustion. And so while many outside the church see the bible as potentially harmful and dangerous, for those inside the church we can be so comfortable with it that hearing it read does little more than pacify us.

And so I wonder where you feel you are at right now as we've heard the bible read and now preached. What were you expecting, even wanting when you came to church tonight or turned on the livestream?

Theologian J. I. Packer wrote this in 2013: "The church is in trouble, you'd agree that wouldn't you? The trouble is that we are not taking our God seriously enough. What's the proof of that? That we are not taking his word seriously enough. And we are not making sure that our faith matches the teaching of scripture. We don't even seem to be interested in finding out. That's not good enough. Maybe you call yourself a Christian but do you know what Christian truth really is? Could you explain your faith? Do you base it on the bible? Could you defend it against challenges?" Do you agree?

Last week in the first 12 verses of chapter 2, Paul outlined and defended his ministry practice while he was with the Thessalonians: they knew and experienced it first hand. That he was devoted to telling them the truth, the Gospel, that he lived among them with great integrity and a deep love for them.

And as we listened last week, I hope you were encouraged and thankful as I was, for how generous God has been to us here at Bundy with the faithful teaching and pastoring I have experienced from Neil and Andy and now also Clinton and Chris. We are well served and have much cause for thanks.

But in our passage tonight, Paul leaves no question about the Thessalonians' attitude as he thanks God for how they responded to hearing God's Word! As he reminds them of they did, they serve as an encouragement and example of how to respond to what God does through Gospel ministry.

¹³ *And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.*

Notice that Paul thanks God, not the Thessalonians, for how they responded to his teaching and ministry amongst them. Salvation, confessing Jesus as Lord, is the work and gift of God that he achieves by his Spirit, through the preaching of the Gospel.

Four times in vv.1-12 he reminded them that what he taught them was the Gospel, the good news about Jesus' life, death, and resurrection, and how we should respond. (v.2, 4, 8, 9).

And Paul does not thank God and commend them for appreciating him or even having a high view of his preaching, but that they recognized what it actually is! The Gospel he preached to them is the very word of God. Notice how unambiguous he is: *when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God.*

When Paul preached it was God himself speaking through him. Paul knew this and he thanks God the Thessalonians *welcomed* and *accepted* it. They recognised that it was God himself addressing them through the words of the apostles. As Spurgeon says,

"They were willing to hear it; they were anxious to hear it; they heard it, and they were attentive in the hearing of it. They lent a willing ear and a ready mind. They did not cavil, and dispute, and question, but they received the word of God. Happy is the preacher who has such people to deal with!"

And the same is true for us as we open our bibles, it is to hear God himself speaking. As we read the words of the apostles like Paul tonight, it is the very words of God. And so hopefully it makes sense to you that we give such priority and time to having the bible read and preached when we gather.

I was a leadership conference a few years ago in a preaching workshop with Peter Adam, a well known speaker and author here in Melbourne. And he was asked by a young man how long he thought a good sermon should be. It's fair to say he was fairly unsatisfied with the answer...

So somewhat frustrated, he asked again why church services should have so much of their time given to the sermon. And it may or may not surprise you that our church is not immune to this kind of question or frustration.

But I thought Peter's answer was so helpful, "So much of our service is spent with us talking. We chat, we sing, we pray, we give announcements. But the sermon is the time to let God have his say."

We gather to hear what God himself has to say to us. And given what we know about God's character, love, generosity, kindness, and fatherly care, shouldn't we long to hear him speak? To know what he says about himself, our lives, and our world?

Isn't that what God deserves and calls for? Isaiah 66:2, God says, *"These are the ones I look on with favor: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word"*

It's why we are committed to the teaching of God's Word every Sunday, in our children's and youth ministry, and our growth groups. It's why we will encourage you to keep your bible's open now! To test what you hear from God's Word so you know what he says, not my or anyone else's opinion.

And it's why we'll encourage you to be reading it for yourself as a habit, and to put it into practice. To receive and accept God's Word as it actually is, is not simply to read it with reverence, but to take it seriously by actually doing what it says. James 1:22, ²² *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says.*

And so have you let yourself be convinced that opening your bible and hearing God speak is anything less than a privilege and joy? Have you let bible reading or growth group or sermons become so routine and comfortable that you have lost all awe and expectancy?

Are you making excuses to not take it seriously or justify not doing what it says. Because Paul is not just reminding them of how they became Christian, he says at the end of v.13 that God's Word *is indeed at work in you who believe.*

God works in us, transforms us by His Word. Hearing God's Word should lead to change. It's why in v.14, Paul gives the evidence of what happened to the Thessalonians as they accepted God's Word rightly: ¹⁴ *For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus*

God's Word changed the Thessalonians, they *became imitators of God's churches in Judea.* Now the point is not that they deliberately did this. Thessalonica was a long trip across Mediterranean Sea to Judea. The point is not that they copied them, but like all who genuinely become Christian their lives were changed to display the distinctive characteristics of those who follow Jesus.

Paul thanked God for this change back in chapter 1:9, *They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,* ¹⁰ *and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead*

The Thessalonians became "Christian everything" – no part of their life was left unchanged as they heard the true and living God speak. Paul thanks God that these new converts, of Gentile background, were displaying the family likeness of belonging to Jesus.

Their life and character looked just like the churches in Judea who mostly Jewish and established earlier. It's why Paul is clear they became imitators of *God's churches in Judea which are in Christ Jesus.* As God works through his Word, he changes us to be more and more like Jesus.

Paul saw this in the Thessalonians when with them, he's heard that it has continued since he left them, and he thanks God for it. And so is this transformation into Christ-likeness something you pray and long for? Something you seek and expect as you hear God speak through his word? To be, as Romans 12 says, *transformed by the renewing of your mind.*

Are you bearing the family resemblance of belonging to Jesus that those who know you can see it? Are you even willing to be called out or challenged by a brother or sister in Christ, or a growth group leader, where there is evidence you are not heeding God's Word?

And where you do this change and progress in yourself or in others, are you giving God the thanks for it as Paul does. It is his work in us by his Word and Spirit and should be cause not for self-congratulating but joyful thanks to the gracious God.

But Paul has particular evidence and imitating in mind as he thanks God for what he has done in the Thessalonians. They accepted God's Word as it is and were changed by it, even though it cost them.
¹⁴ *For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews*

The experience of immediate suffering or persecution for loyalty to Jesus is consistent throughout the NT and an ongoing reality for many believers today. And we heard what this looked like in the reading from Acts 17. As the gospel was preached there was salvation and opposition.

And the suffering they experienced is quite similar to what we might expect today: There was social rejection, verbal abuse, and accusations being made. Jealousy led to riots which lead to public shaming and humiliation and even driving Paul out of the town, and even the next one after that!

Suffering is part and parcel of accepting and living the Gospel. And it is important we grasp this because the temptation will always be there to be ashamed of what Jesus says or just avoid anything controversial, or to remain silent and make sure we don't display any of those Christian distinctive.

Jesus warned, *If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of them when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels.*" (Mark 8:38)

You might be unsettled by the mockery our PM receives for praying or going to church, or the anger around Margaret Court's Order of Australia award based on her Christian views, or anxious about the change or suppression bill that recently passed through parliament.

It is our default nature to avoid the cost or suffering so we need to be upfront about it and take seriously the danger. Because although suffering is expected when loyal to Jesus, God's Word is clear that suffering need not rob us of confidence and joy but can actually give it to us.

I've put a number of references in the outline for you. Suffering is the context for clinging to God's Word and trusting his promises. It's often the situation in which we grow and change the most in our Christ-likeness. So if you are Christian here tonight it's worth asking is this your expectation?

And it's worth reflecting on whether we are ashamed of what Jesus says? Are we hiding or changing any aspect of being Christian to fit in, or even just conforming to the world to avoid the cost? Unwilling to speak up on controversial subject, tell others we are Christian or go to church, or be seen to be different at all. These are hard questions but worth reflecting on.

Because expecting persecution does not make it pleasant in any way, nor does it guarantee that suffering will lead us to rejoice and a deeper trust in God. So Paul doesn't simply remind the Thessalonians of their suffering, but expands on it to help them understand it.

And what he says about the Jews in vv.15-16 has been described as Paul's most aggressive, vindictive, and harsh words. They have been called anti-Semitic, hate-filled, and potential fuel to the fire of the mistreatment of Jews. And sadly Christianity does not have an innocent history in this regard.

But while Paul's words might be shocking as we read them, we need to remember that Paul himself was a Jew. And his love and concern for his people is deeply expressed in Romans 9-11. He longed for them to repent and turn to Jesus, even willing to forfeit his own salvation if it would result in theirs! After leaving Thessalonica, in Acts 17-18 Paul continued to preach the Jews despite their hostility.

Paul has no joy in what he writes here, rather he wants the Thessalonians to understand their suffering which we'll see next week in 3:3, were still happening when Paul writes to them. He wants them to see it from the wider perspective of the whole church.

And Paul tells them 5 things about the Jews who persecuted them: v.15, *who killed the Lord Jesus*. While Jesus died on a Roman cross, the Jews clearly shared the guilt in sending him there. So this is not blame shifting or forgetting about Pilate, but just a statement of history and fact.

The Jews who were at Jesus' trial took this responsibility, even declaring that Jesus' blood is on them and their children (Mt 27:25). Secondly, he says they also killed the prophets. Jesus also accused them of this and was something the Jews he spoke with admitted to in Matthew 23.

Thirdly, they *drove us out*. This is what we heard in Acts 17. The Jews stirred up a mob and riot and had Paul driven out of Thessalonica. He went to Berea where they again drove them out. Fourthly, *they displease God*. This was especially seen in their killing of Jesus but is a particularly loaded thing to say because they were convinced they were serving God!

And fifthly, *they are hostile to everyone*. The 1st century Roman historian Tacitus also said the Jews disliked everyone, but Paul is not making some general statement. Their hostility to all people is seen, v.16, in their *effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved*.

Without hearing the good news about Jesus, people cannot be saved, cannot know and be accepted by God. And so surely seeking to deprive people of life-giving good news is seen as atrocious.

And so Paul concludes that by doing this, v.16, *they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last*.

The idea of 'heaping' or 'filling' up sins to the limit comes from the OT. God's enemies are always storing up wrath for themselves, taking God's patience for granted, and essentially making themselves ripe for judgement. We see an example of this in the Amorites in Genesis 15:6.

Paul sees the ongoing opposition of the Jews in the same way. It might be that Paul actually has in mind Jesus' own words to the Jews in Matthew 23. ²⁹ *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you build the tombs of the prophets and decorate the monuments of the righteous, ³⁰ saying, ‘If we had lived in the days of our fathers, we would not have taken part with them in shedding the blood of the prophets.’ ³¹ Thus you witness against yourselves that you are sons of those who murdered the prophets. ³² Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers. ³³ You serpents, you brood of vipers, how are you to escape being sentenced to hell? ³⁴ Therefore I send you prophets and wise men and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and persecute from town to town.* (Mt 23:29-34 ESV)

Paul is saying the Jews are doing to you what they've always done to God's people. In fact, they are even just doing what Jesus said they would: filling up, heaping up their sins and God will judge them. But the tense of that final sentence is quite confusing. Is Paul saying that God has already poured his wrath on the Jews? And if so, what does that mean?

It could be that Paul sees recent events that have happened as evidence of God's judgement on the Jews – such as in AD49 when emperor Claudius decreed the massacre of thousands Jews during Passover. Or perhaps food shortages in Judea, something the Thessalonians would have known.

Or it could be Paul uses the past tense to convey the certainty of a future event. Just as we must say “it is done” when asked to do something. And I think this is likely as in chapter 1:10 Paul describes God’s wrath as a future event, something that will happen when Jesus returns in judgement.

Either way, Paul wants them and us to see our experience of suffering from God’s standpoint. God is not distant or removed from the suffering of his church, he knows, he cares, and he will certainly judge. And more, just as with Jesus, God can even use his enemies best efforts for his own purposes.

What the Thessalonians and many still today experience is not unique and they are not alone. As 1Peter 4 says, ¹² *Dear friends, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal that has come on you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.* ¹³ *But rejoice inasmuch as you participate in the sufferings of Christ, so that you may be overjoyed when his glory is revealed.*

But why bring this up? Why remind the Thessalonians of how they did respond and have experienced? And why does Paul frame all of this in his context of his thankfulness to God?

Well the Thessalonian church was probably just weeks old, and we are going to see next week in 3:1 that Paul was anxious to know how this young church is going as they continued to face opposition.

But having heard they are persevering, he reminds them of what will keep them going, v.13, *God’s Word which is indeed at work in you who believe.* God’s people have always had opposition when they take his word seriously, you did and are experiencing this, and this same Word will keep you.

Spurgeon said, “It was God’s Word that made us, is it any wonder that His Word will sustain us?”

Perhaps Paul was worried their confidence was wavering or that ongoing suffering might cause them to just conform what is easier or whether its just because he knows the human heart is deceptive above all else, he reminds them to convince them that it is by welcoming and accepting God’s Word, *as it actually is*, we are encouraged and equipped to keep going as God does his good work in us.

A few years ago I met a guy named Bruce. Bruce served in the Vietnam war and although not a believer, he took with him a small Gideons bible containing the Psalms and NT. He’d never read it and was even mocked by his fellow soldiers for having it.

After returning from the war, he wasn’t the same man, which ultimately resulted in his wife leaving him. After moving house, Bruce was putting his books onto a shelf in the categories of fiction and non-fiction. He couldn’t decide where his little bible went so he left it off the shelf.

It sat on his table for some weeks before one day he sat down and read it. And there in that moment, on first reading, Bruce was convicted by God’s Word, repented and put his trust in Jesus. He has since spent over 30 years teaching RE and Sunday school and remains one of the most eager students of the bible I have ever met.

And stories like Bruce’s are not rare as God brings people to himself through his Word. Are you convinced that Hearing God’s Word is not just sufficient to save people, but keep you going too even in the midst of suffering? Are you turning to God’s Word constantly to ground your identity, experiences, and circumstances in what God has done, is doing, and will do?

Now you might be thinking this is nothing new or special – read your bible, listen well – and you’d be right! But how easily do we make excuses or convince ourselves it’s not a big deal when we don’t! British preacher John Blanchard says it well: “Surely we only have to be realistic and honest with ourselves to know how regularly we need to turn to the bible. How often do we face problems, temptation, or pressure? (And we may add to that, face complacency, apathy, envy?!) *Every day!* Then how often do we need instruction, guidance, and greater encouragement? *Every day!*”

Then quoting American Evangelist D.L Moody he says, “A man can no more take in a supply of grace for the future than he can eat enough today to last him for the next 6 months, or take sufficient air into his lungs with one breath to sustain life for a week. We must draw upon God's boundless store of grace from day to day as we need it.”

How tempted are to reduce hearing God’s Word to mere information, a bit more knowledge about God that might come in useful at some stage. Or how often do we let it all become a bit mechanical. I put in the bible reading and it didn’t fix my feelings or situation or really do anything – common at YG.

But notice that Paul doesn’t remind them simply of a method or routine, but of welcoming and accepting the very words God that are true, living giving, and nourish our souls. Psalm 119:103 says, *How sweet are your words to my taste, sweeter than honey to my mouth!*

As Tozer says, “The bible is not an end in itself, but a means to bring men to an intimate and satisfying knowledge of God, that they may enter into Him, that they might delight in his presence, may taste and know the inner sweetness of the very God himself and in the core and centre of their hearts.” (Preface to the pursuit of God)

Are you giving yourself to know, memorize, delight in, and live by this word? Are you combating apathy, laziness, busyness, or whatever it is that allows us to treat the Bible as anything less than the powerful, life giving, transforming and sustaining word of God that is actually is? Let’s pray.

I seek you with all my heart; do not let me stray from your commands. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you. Praise be to you, LORD; teach me your decrees.

I rejoice in following your statutes as one rejoices in great riches. I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways. I delight in your decrees; I will not neglect your word. (Psalm 119:10-16)