

1 THESS 2.13-20: PAUL REFLECTS ON HIS MINISTRY IN THESSALONICA

Chelmsford Cathedral, Breakfast with the Bible 26 April 2015

1. A MODEL CONGREGATION

2.13: 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

They “**received the word of God... not as a human word but as it really is, God's word**”. They recognised that the message that the apostles brought was from God himself.

Peterson: “When you got the Message of God we preached, you didn't pass it off as just one more human opinion, but you took it to heart as God's true word to you...” (The Message). As a result, they began to experience God's transforming power in their lives. “**God's word**” says Paul, “**is also at work in you believers**”.

When God's Word is preached, “something transformative, empowering, life-giving happens” (Darrell Johnson). Or in the words of Tom Wright, the former Bishop of Durham: “The preaching of the word stands alongside the gospel sacraments as one of the normal and vital ways in which the living God is active and at work in the lives of his people and the wider church... It is meant to be an occasion, when, so to speak, God happens: when that strange and yet familiar moment comes upon us, and we know that we have been addressed, healed, confronted and kindled by the one who made us and loves us”.

This was the experience of the Thessalonians. This too can be our experience.

But for God to work through the preacher, we need to “believe” – we need to expect to hear not just the preacher, but to hear God himself. Where people do not expect God to speak through his Word, nothing happens. The Gospel writers tell us that there were occasions when Jesus could do no mighty work “because of their unbelief” (Matt 13.58). The fact is that although God's Word is power, where the congregation is unreceptive, lives are not transformed.

Q: How good are we at listening to sermons? Do we receive what we hear as God's Word? To what extent does God's Word transform our lives?

2. A SUFFERING CHURCH

2.14 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”

We learn from Acts 17.1-9, that as a result of Paul and Silas preaching the Gospel “the city was in an uproar”. Jason and other believers were dragged before the city authorities, and accused of “turning the world upside down”. “What they really meant was that [the Gospel message] turned their world upside down. It pricked their pride too painfully. It questioned their motives too closely. And it set up an alternative way of living which they found too challenging” (Eddie Gibbs).

The church experienced massive opposition, which continued for years. Some six years later Paul spoke of the churches of Macedonia (which included not least Thessalonica) as enduring “a severe ordeal of affliction” which resulted in what Paul described as “severe poverty”, which was probably the result of ongoing looting and violence (2 Cor 8.2).

For Paul persecution appears to be evidence of the genuineness of their faith. He says to the churches in Iconium and Antioch in Syria: “It is through many persecutions that we must enter the Kingdom of God” (Acts 14.22). Paul repeats this idea in 2 Tim 3.12: “All who want to live a godly life will be persecuted”. Jesus said that following him involves taking up a cross (Mk 8.34) Thomas Oden: “Some form of suffering is the inevitable outgrowth of Christian witness in a world that hates to be told of the truth and loves the darkness.... This may occur in subtle forms of social rejection, having one’s way hedged, being blocked out of preferment, being slandered or neglected, but it will come in a life lived seriously in Christian witness ‘even when no one molests or vexes their body; for they suffer this persecution, not in their bodies, but in their hearts’ (Augustine, City of God XVIII.51)”

Here in 1 Thess 2.14 Paul talks of the Thessalonians becoming “**imitators**” of the churches in Judea. This was an unwitting rather than a deliberate imitation. John Stott: “All true churches, which belong to God and live in Christ, are bound on that account, in spite of cultural differences, to display a certain similarity to one another”.

Question: does this similarity have to include suffering

3. Digression: GOD’S PEOPLE WILL BE VINDICATED

Paul not only itemises the suffering that the Jews have inflicted upon Jesus and his followers – but he also assures the Thessalonians that they will be vindicated – God will punish those who oppose him: The Jews “**killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out; they displease God and oppose everyone 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**” (vv15,16).

Some have accused Paul of anti-Semitism. But we have to balance these verses with what Paul later wrote in Romans 9-11. There in Romans we discover that Paul was proud of being a Jew. Paul was not writing from hatred but out of sorrow and concern. It gave him no joy to say that those who oppose God and his purposes will experience God’s judgment on their lives.

Interestingly the judgement of which Paul speaks here is not the judgement to come at the end of time, but rather a form of judgment within the present. Indeed, Paul says “**God’s wrath has overtaken them at last**”. What had Paul in mind? Perhaps Paul had in mind two things in particular: for in AD 49 Claudius had issued a decree which expelled the Jews from Rome; and at the Passover in the same year thousands of Jews had been massacred in the temple of Jerusalem. All this was but a foretaste of even greater suffering to come in AD 70 when the Temple was destroyed and the Jewish nation state came to an end.

“At the end of the day, we must always remember that God is the Judge of all humanity, both of the Jews and of the Gentiles. And that very Judge is the one who is the Saviour who extends his hand to both the Jew and the Gentile. All should respond. None should resist. Both the divine call and warning are clear” (Gene Green)

Question: To what extent do we find the concept of judgement a comforting thought?

4. A CARING PASTOR

Paul was not just a theologian; he was first and foremost was a pastor, who cared deeply for the churches he had founded. Earlier Paul had likened himself to a mother “tenderly caring for her own children” (2.7); he talked of dealing with the Thessalonians “like a father with his children” (2.11). We see this same concern re-appearing here:

2.17 : As for us, brothers & sisters, when for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you – in person, not in heart – we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face.

”**We were made orphans**”. When today we speak of orphans, we speak of children who have lost their parents. However, here Paul speaks of himself as an ‘orphaned parent’ – he felt like a parent who has lost his children, such was his sense of bereavement. However, he assures the Thessalonians, that this separation was only physical – “**in person, but not in heart**” – or as we would say: “out of sight but never out of mind”

When we think of church, all too often we think of it in institutional terms. If we are unwell and are not able to go to church, we think perhaps of missing out on the services. However, for Paul, church was about people – he missed his brothers and sisters in Christ.

Q: How relational is our view of church? Are we in the first place coming to church for a service – or are we coming to meet our brothers and sisters?

5. A FRUSTRATED PASTOR

2.18: We wanted to come to you – certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again – but Satan blocked our way

Paul believed in the reality of the Evil One. He doesn’t often mention Satan, but “when he does he seems to be aware that behind at least some of the ordinary frustrations and thwarted plans that are common to the human race we may discern a darker & more malevolent force at work”. (Tom Wright). Barclay: “It is Satan’s work to throw obstacles into the Christian’s way – and it is our work to surmount them, for road-blocks were made to be circumvented”!

How precisely did Satan hinder Paul’s return?

1. Continuing Jewish opposition?
2. His ‘thorn in the flesh’: “But to keep me from being puffed up... I was given a physical ailment, which acts as Satan’s messenger to beat me and keep me from being proud” (2 Cor 12.7)
3. A legal ban which the magistrates of Thessalonica put on Jason: The authorities made Jason & the others pay “bail” (Acts 17.8). Was this in fact some kind of security – money which they would forfeit + other penalties if Paul were to return?
4. Some problem at Corinth

But Satan didn’t have the last word. It is precisely because Paul was not able to visit the Thessalonians that we have this letter. Perhaps it was in the over-ruling providence of God that Paul not able to return – for we would be the poorer without this letter!

For reflection: We are not to see Satan under every bed – we are not to transfer to Satan the blame which perhaps we should own because of our own stupidity. But nor are we to ignore the reality of the Evil One

6. A PROUD PASTOR

2.19,20 For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory [GNB pride] and joy.

Paul was intensely proud of the Thessalonians – perhaps understandably, because they were his children in Christ. He describes them as his “**crown**” of boasting. Paul is here referring not to a ‘diadem’, a royal crown, which is given simply because one is born into the right family; but an athlete’s ‘crown’ or ‘wreath of laurel leaves’ (cf the Olympics) given to the person who has come first. This ‘crown’ is a ‘crown of achievement’. I.e. what Paul is saying = “in terms of achievement, what I prize most of all is you’!

For reflection: The things that really count in this life have to do with people, not with money or position. If God is impressed by anything, then it is the influence we have had on other people. We never waste our time when we are ‘investors in people’. What does that say to us?