A Christian's Heart for the Church
1 Thessalonians 2:13–20
October 18th, 2026

Introduction

1 Thessalonians 2:13–20…

In the fall of 1891, the renowned pastor and "Prince of Preachers," Charles Haddon Spurgeon, left the gloomy weather of London for sunny southern France. This had become a regular practice for Spurgeon during the cooler months, as a way to help his many health problems, including gout, chronic kidney disease, and pain in his muscles, joints, and nerves, not to mention burnout from overwork and recurring depression.

During this time away from his church, Spurgeon wrote weekly letters to his beloved congregation. I'd like to read you one of them…

"Menton, France. Dec. 31, 1891.

My Dear Friends,

I am sorry my letter of last week reached London too late for reading on Sunday, but this was occasioned by delays in the trains, & not by any omission on my part…

I believe I am right in reporting a greater change in the disease than could be spoken of before. It is still a great drain upon me; but as it has improved so far, I believe it will make more rapid [decrease]. What a joy it will be to be within measurable distance of the time to return to my pulpit & to you. [But] I have not reached that point yet.

Now may the Lord cause the cloud of blessing to burst upon you in a great tropical shower. I am expecting this. Grateful beyond expression for all that the Lord has done & is doing, I am eager for more…

Yours to serve when I can & to love unceasingly,
C. H. Spurgeon"

Brothers and sisters, that is the heart of a man who loved the church.

This was a man who could barely stand the pain of being away from his church. His people were constantly on his mind. He wrote to them often. He was filled with joy at the thought of being reunited with them. He prayed for the Lord to shower blessings on their heads. His thankfulness for what the Lord had done in them and through them was almost inexpressible, and he was eager to see what God would continue to do through them…

I share this story because it is a living, historical example of what we see in our passage this morning.

1 Thessalonians 2:13–20 provides two marks of a biblical heart for God's people. These verses show that a Christian's heart for the church should be marked by:

I. Gratitude for God's Work in the Church (2:13–16)
II. Longing for Fellowship with the Church (2:17–20)

It is my prayer this morning that we would rightly esteem Christ's church. In an era so commonly marked by isolated, lone-wolf Christianity, so-called "online church," and a take-it-or-leave-it attitude toward fellowship with God's people, 1 Thessalonians 2:13–20 gives us a different vision. As we gaze upon these verses, I pray the Lord would use them to stir our hearts to rightly love and appreciate our brothers and sisters in Christ.

So we will begin with the first mark of a Christian's heart for God's people, seen in 2:13–16: Gratitude for God's Work in the Church. Paul writes, "2:13."

I. Gratitude for God's Work in the Church (2:13–16)

What we have in this verse is Paul's second prayer of thanks. Back in 1:2–3 he wrote, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind…" and went on to list numerous reasons. Similarly, here in 2:13 Paul gives more reasons why he and his co-laborers "constantly thank God" for them.

But when Paul writes, “for this reason,” what is he referring to? What is the reason behind his thanksgiving? He tells us: they “constantly thank God” because of how the Thessalonians “received the word of God.”

This brings us to our first subpoint:

A. Gratitude for the Church’s Reception of God’s Word (2:13a)

The Apostle is thanking God for the Thessalonians’ reception of God’s truth, and there are a couple of details I want us to note.

First, Paul tells the Thessalonians that they “received the word of God which you heard from us.” He is referring to the gospel preaching he and his fellow ministers did when they first arrived in Thessalonica. Acts 17 says that Paul taught there from the OT Scriptures, explaining and proving that Jesus of Nazareth was the Messiah and Savior of the world, who suffered as a sin-bearing substitute and rose from the dead. It was this Bible-based, gospel-centered preaching that the Thessalonians heard and received.

Second, verse 13 says the Thessalonians “accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God.” Though this message came from the mouths of men, they recognized it was not man-made. It was not merely a message from Paul, but a message from God. And Paul says they “accepted it,” meaning they warmly welcomed it and believed it in their minds and hearts.

That raises a question: Why does Paul thank the Lord for how the Thessalonians received the gospel? What is the connection?

The connection is this: Paul’s gratitude to God for the Thessalonians’ acceptance of the gospel shows that God is the one who enabled them to believe! Ephesians 2:8 says, “For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God.”

Receiving and believing the gospel is a gift from God. You don’t thank somebody for something they didn’t do, so Paul thanks God because God gave the gift. When you were growing up and received a gift for your birthday or Christmas, you didn’t thank the delivery truck driver; you thanked your parents! Why? Because they

were the source of the gift. In the same way, Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians' belief in the gospel because God is the source of that belief…

So let me ask you: Have you accepted the word of God? Have you warmly welcomed the gospel of Jesus Christ?

The good news of Jesus Christ is this: while we are all hopeless sinners, separated from God by our sin and rebellion against the one true God, the Lord in His great mercy sent His Son on a rescue mission. Jesus was fully God, yet He came down to earth, became a man, and lived the only perfect, sinless life there has ever been. But this Jesus was rejected by both the Jews and the Romans, and they crucified Him on a cross. On that cross, Jesus did not merely suffer the physical pain of crucifixion; He was serving as a sin-bearing substitute for sinners. Christ suffered under God's wrath against sin and paid the penalty in our place. Then, three days later, He rose from the dead, proving that His sacrifice was accepted and that He has conquered sin and death. And now, all who repent of their sins and place their faith in Him will be saved.

Have you submitted to the gospel and recognized that the source of this message is God Himself?

I pray that you have… But if you have not, I pray that you would today. While it is true that no one can come to Christ unless the Father draws him, it is also true that whoever comes to Him will by no means be cast out (John 6:37, 44). Receive and believe the gospel today, and we will all give thanks to God for His miraculous work of salvation…

Yet there is more to thank God for than conversion. Paul thanks God not only for the Thessalonians' salvation, but also for their transformation. Look at the end of 2:13. Paul writes that the word of God "also performs its work in you who believe. For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus."

This brings us to our second subpoint. A Christian's heart should be marked by:

B. Gratitude for the Church's Transformation by God's Word (2:13b–16)

The phrase "performs its work" translates the Greek word *energeō*, which refers to activity, working, producing, and operating. The idea is that God's Word is

accomplishing its intended purpose. That is why the KJV says the word of God "effectually worketh." Put simply, the truth was transforming the Thessalonians.

And this was not a one-time event at conversion, but an ongoing reality. "Performs its work" is in the present tense, meaning God's Word was continually working in these believers.

But I must make an important point here based on the grammar of the text. In v. 13, the present-tense verb "performs its work" is matched with the present-active "believe." Here we see the interplay between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. God's Word does the work of transformation within a person, and that work is ongoing and progressive. Yet this powerful, continual work of God's Word happens as one continually believes. Christians must keep placing their faith in God's Word, and as they do, God will keep working in them.

You can think of it like this. In John 15, Jesus tells His disciples that they are already clean because of the word He has spoken to them (15:3). Yet He still calls them to abide in Him and to let His words abide in them, so that they will bear fruit (15:4, 7). Jesus is the vine, the source of all their life. Apart from Him they can do nothing (15:5). And yet every disciple must continually remain connected to Him and His Word in order to grow.

Paul teaches the same truth here. God's Word is what works in believers, enabling them to grow. At the same time, Christians must continue to believe and stay connected to God's Word. And the God who chose us and appointed us to bear fruit (15:16) is faithful to keep that work going.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, if the Word is what transforms us, let me exhort us all this morning to give careful attention to how we continually receive it. The Westminster Larger Catechism offers helpful counsel here. It says we should read Scripture with reverence, convinced it is truly God's Word and that only He can help us understand it. We come wanting to know, believe, and obey what He reveals, reading carefully and applying it with prayer, submission, and meditation (Q. 157). Likewise, we should come to the preaching of God's Word prepared and prayerful, testing what we hear by Scripture. To the degree it aligns with the Bible, we are to receive it as God's Word to us, with faith, love, and humility. We should

meditate on it, talk about it with others, treasure it in our hearts, and let it bear fruit in our lives (Q. 160)...

Brothers and sisters, God's Word transforms His people. That is the general principle at the end of v. 13.

If you study the Scriptures, you'll find that God's Word works in His people in many ways. But in this context, one specific work is highlighted. How did Paul know God's Word was effectively working in these believers?

Look at v. 14 with me. Paul writes, "2:14."

The Apostle says the evidence of God's powerful work through His Word in these believers was that they had faithfully endured suffering.

Once again, we find a parallel with chapter 1. In 1:6, Paul thanked God and praised the Thessalonians for becoming imitators (the same word) of him and of the Lord as they endured suffering with the joy of the Holy Spirit. And in 2:14, Paul again thanks God for His transforming work in these Christians. By the power of His Word, God enabled these brand-new believers to remain faithful to Christ even when fierce persecution came.

Persecution was a common reality for believers at this point in history. Paul says the Thessalonians were joining the ranks of Christ's followers who "endured the same sufferings at the hands of [their] own countrymen" because of their faith.

Specifically, he compares them to the churches in Judea, the region around Jerusalem and the heartland of the early church. From the time the church was born at Pentecost, the Jewish Christians there suffered for their faith at the hands of fellow Jews.

Tragically, persecution from unbelieving Jews was nothing new. Paul describes them as those "who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out." While there has always been a true and faithful remnant within Israel, throughout the ages unbelieving Israel has, ironically, been a major persecutor of God's faithful.

The ultimate example is Christ Himself. Though He was the true Messiah, the Jews, with Roman help, killed Him. But this was nothing new. In OT times, apostate Israel had also killed some of the true prophets of Yahweh. And now the Apostles and their fellow ministers were being persecuted and driven out as well.

Because of this, Paul says of these unbelieving Jews: "2:15b–16."

Though Israel was called to be a holy nation unto the Lord, tragically, most of the nation had rejected their Messiah and was actively hostile toward anyone who preached Jesus. They were rabidly opposed to the one message that can actually save men from their sins. While 1 Timothy 2:4 says God "desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth," these opponents were "hostile to all men," hindering the gospel from going to the Gentiles "so that they may be saved" (2:16).

The result, Paul says, is that "they always fill up the measure of their sins."

In Matthew 23:31–36, Jesus called the Pharisees "sons of those who murdered the prophets," "serpents," and a "brood of vipers." He said they would kill, crucify, scourge, and persecute the messengers He sent, so that the guilt of righteous blood would fall on them. They would "fill up the measure of the guilt of [their] fathers" and would not escape the sentence of hell.

In 1 Thessalonians, Paul picks up this prophesied reality and connects it to his own day. Just as Genesis 15 describes the Amorites' iniquity building until the day God would release His judgment, so it was with unbelieving Israel. The ongoing persecution of God's faithful throughout the ages was like a cup being filled, until one day it is full, and God says enough is enough and pours out His wrath on them and on all who reject the gospel of Jesus Christ. And just as Pastor Adrian described the "already, not yet" reality of God's kingdom, we find here the "already, not yet" reality of God's wrath. God's wrath has already come upon the enemies of the gospel, but it has not yet been fully poured out as it will be at the end of the age…

For both the Thessalonians and us today, these verses remind us that those who oppose Christ and hinder the gospel will not escape God's righteous judgment.

Their opposition may seem successful for a season, but God will ultimately vindicate His people and judge those who persist in rebellion against Him…

So in these verses, Paul is thanking God that the Thessalonians were not enemies of the gospel, but transformed receivers of it. Though this largely Gentile church faced heavy persecution from fellow Gentiles stirred up by unbelieving Jews (Acts 17:5), these brand-new believers were faithfully persevering in the faith.

Therefore, brothers and sisters, we should thank God not only when we see one another growing in biblical knowledge or serving in ministry, but also when we see one another holding fast to Christ amid suffering, disappointment, rejection, and hardship. When we see that, it's a reason to go to that brother or sister and say, "I thank God for what He is doing in your life."

So through the Apostle's example, we see that a Christian's heart should be marked by gratitude for God's work in the church… But Paul's affection did not stop with thanksgiving. His love was so deep that being separated from these believers caused him genuine sorrow. And that brings us to the second mark of a Christian's heart for the church: Longing for Fellowship with the Church.

II. Longing for Fellowship with the Church (2:17–20)

As with vv. 13–16, we will look at this section in two subpoints. The first focuses on vv. 17–18:

A. The Eager Desire for Fellowship (2:17–18)

The Apostle Paul writes: "2:17–18."

As we begin, notice how Paul continues to use intimate, family language throughout this chapter. In 2:7, Paul said he cherished the church like a nursing mother. In 2:11, he said he lovingly ministered to them like a father. And now in 2:17, he calls these saints his "brethren," his dear brothers and sisters in the family of God. Paul also says he was "taken away from [them]." This phrase literally refers to being orphaned. The NIV translates it, "when we were orphaned by being separated from you."

Think of what Paul is saying. Parents, imagine your child being torn away from you. Young people, imagine being a small child ripped away from your mom and dad. Paul is saying that being separated from his fellow believers felt like a young child being violently separated from his parents… That is how close a bond they had in Christ.

With this, Paul has described his family connection to these saints from every angle. By using the images of mother, father, brother, sister, and child, Paul has made it clear that they were family. And as family, Paul was grieved in spirit to be away from them, even for "a short while."

But he says they were separated only "in person," not "in spirit." Though separated physically, they were not separated spiritually. While he could not see their faces, they were still in his *kardia*, his heart. He constantly thought about them. He constantly prayed for them. And he constantly longed to see them.

In fact, he puts it this way in v. 17: "we were all the more eager with great desire to see your face." This is extremely strong language. Paul had a deep yearning, an "intense longing" (NIV), that drove him and his co-workers to make every effort to return to this church.

Have you ever felt this way about someone? I have. It reminds me of when my wife, Naomi, and I were first dating long-distance. I was here, and she was down at The Master's University. I remember that the very first weekend after she went back to TMU for the semester, I drove down to see her. I had an eager desire to be with her, and that led me to make plans to go visit.

This was Paul's heart for the Thessalonians. Paul had a pure and holy passion for the church. That's why he continues in v. 18: "2:18."

Paul and his companions' eager, great desire for fellowship with these saints made them want to come back. And though he is speaking on behalf of his ministry team, this section is so personal that Paul feels compelled to add his own voice: "I, Paul," "wanted to come to you." In fact, he says he had wanted and planned to return "more than once."

But if Paul had such a great desire to reunite with these people, why hadn't he? He says in v. 18 that it was because "Satan hindered us." Paul's plans to be with the Thessalonians were thwarted, prevented, and cut off by satanic opposition.

So what is this satanic resistance? It is not explicitly stated, but contextually I think it makes best sense that Paul is referring to the persecution that forced him out of the city and kept him out. Just back in 2:14–16, Paul said he had suffered persecution, specifically from the Jews, because of his gospel preaching. These opponents of the gospel were just like the Pharisees of Jesus' day, whom our Lord called "serpents," a "brood of vipers," and destined for hell in Matthew 23. In other words, they were acting like sons of Satan. And in a similar way, the persecution Paul received was coming from sons of Satan. Paul understood that Satan was at work behind these mobs persecuting him, his co-workers, and the church. Therefore, he says in v. 18, "Satan hindered us."

This whole situation was a theater of spiritual warfare. There was, and is, an active enemy of God and His people. Satan and his minions are at war against the kingdom of God, and they seek to put up any barrier they can against the advance of the gospel.

However, this does not in any way undermine God's sovereignty. All of this happens under the sovereign rule of God. Satan and his workers oppose God, but God will without a doubt ensure that His chosen people are saved. Jesus says without qualification in John 6:37, "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me." Ephesians 1:11 says God "works all things after the counsel of His will." And as 1 Thessalonians 2:16 showed us, God's opponents are storing up judgment for themselves until the day God in His sovereignty decides to unleash His wrath upon them. So God is on the throne, yet we do have an active enemy…

But remember, Paul's main point in these verses is his longing for fellowship with the church. The only thing that could hold him back was satanic opposition under the providence of God. Yet today, we live in a culture that disengages from deep fellowship for much lesser reasons.

So let me ask us all: What is your heart toward the church? How would you feel if you were cut off from the church? Would it grieve your soul to be separated from

the family of God? When you are away from our church, do you miss the people, or merely the activities? Do you long to gather because you genuinely love your brothers and sisters in Christ? When someone is absent, do you notice? Do you reach out? Do you pray for them? Are there believers in this congregation whose burdens you carry and whose spiritual growth brings you joy?

By God's grace, I believe we are a church with real community. However, there is always room to grow. Brothers and sisters, may God use this passage to help us rightly esteem the body of Christ. May we have a fervent, eager, and great longing to be with God's people. May we view the body of Christ with the eyes of Christ…

But Paul doesn't stop at earthly fellowship. In the closing verses of this chapter, he expands the horizon all the way into eternity when he writes, "2:19–20."

What we find in these verses is what we can call:
B. The Eternal Delight of Fellowship (2:19–20)

Here Paul shifts his focus from the present to the future. Throughout this section, he has been expressing his deep love for the Thessalonians and assuring them that their separation was not due to any lack of love on his part. And his final point is that they themselves will be his hope, joy, and crown when he stands before Christ.

The imagery here is somewhat like an awards celebration. In that day, the term "crown" referred to a prize given to a victorious athlete. So Paul paints a picture of a coming day when he and the Thessalonians will stand in the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ in all His radiant glory. And when Christ comes on that final day, these believers will be like Paul's trophies. As a faithful minister of Christ, Paul will present these trophies to the Lord Jesus Himself. In Romans 15:16, Paul describes himself as a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles, serving the gospel of God like a priest, so that his offering of the Gentiles who came to faith through his ministry might be acceptable to the Lord.

That future day will be a day of glory and boasting. Paul will boast in what the Lord did through a weak vessel like himself, and Christ will get all the glory. On that day, Paul will be filled with inexpressible joy as he stands in everlasting fellowship with the church in the presence of Christ…

And brothers and sisters, this is not just a reality for Paul. We should think about one another in light of that future day as well. A day is coming when we will be brought into the presence of the Lord, and we will enjoy the eternal delight of perfect, sinless fellowship with one another and with our Savior. May God use this future reality to shape our present relationships with one another…

Conclusion

So as we close this morning, I want to take you back to the letter Charles Spurgeon wrote to his beloved congregation on December 31, 1891. Remember what he said? "What a joy it will be to be within measurable distance of the time to return to my pulpit & to you." Well, in God's providence, Spurgeon never returned to his pulpit. Just one month later, on January 31, 1892, Charles Spurgeon went home to be with the Lord…

The reunion he so eagerly anticipated with his beloved congregation never took place in this life. But that was not the end of the story. Spurgeon's hope, like Paul's, was ultimately anchored in Christ and our future with Him. And one day, when Christ returns, all who belong to Him will be gathered together in His presence forever.

Brothers and sisters, think about that day. The believers with whom we have worshiped, prayed, served, wept, and rejoiced will be there. Those we have encouraged in their suffering, strengthened in their faith, and helped to grow in Christ will be there.

And above all, the Lord Jesus Christ, the One who loved us and gave Himself for us, will be there. What a glorious day that will be.

Until then, may God give us hearts like Paul's—hearts filled with gratitude for God's work in the church and hearts that genuinely long for fellowship with the church.

May we love the church because Christ loves the church.

And may we live with one another today with that glorious future day in mind, when we will be together forever in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ…