

*The Word at Work*  
*1 Thessalonians 2: 13-16*

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As we make our way through Paul's letter to the Thessalonian church, we'll take a fairly straightforward approach this morning. I'd like just to walk you through three sections of this passage and discuss how they relate to us today; in particular how they provide spiritual diagnostics for our lives.



**1) The Word of God at Work.** Paul expresses his great affection and enthusiasm for these young Christians. He recalls what it was like to tell them the Gospel of Jesus Christ. They responded as if they were hearing not Paul but God himself speaking to them. He writes, “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.” There is a profound mystery going on here. Someone tells us the story of Jesus in their own words. We hear it from their

voice. Maybe they tell it simply, or haltingly, or even with some parts missing. But as they speak we hear another voice. The voice of God speaks in our hearts. Something resounds inside us. The Spirit moves us. We find we believe. As we believe, energy and joy flow inside us. Something changes within us. This is the consistent experience of Christian believers through the centuries across cultures and continents.

Let's think for a minute about how unique this is. People love to get into stories. Sometimes a powerful story can sweep us up so much that we feel like we'd like to live in it. You go to Comic-Con and some people are dressed up as Obi wan-Kenobi or Darth Vader. Star Wars deeply moves them. People still have Harry Potter parties where they dress up as Harry or Dumbledore or Ron or Hermione. At Harry Potter World at Universal Studios, people snap up wooden wands and Gryffindor scarves. But does anyone ever say, "I feel Harry Potter stir in my heart and so I speak to him about my life." Does anyone really experience the Force when they swing their plastic light saber? We get closer to this, perhaps, when we dive deep into rendering great music through our instruments. It's as if we inhabit the music and the music inhabits us. It can feel like the music cleanses us and even heals us. But do we get the profound sense that actual harm we have done has been forgiven through a genuine atonement having been made on our behalf? We may lose ourselves in great artwork, and we feel a sense of the eternal through it. But does any painting or building become a genuine source of hope that our lives will go on after this body ceases?

Something happens when someone tells us the gospel story. Christ has died. Christ is risen. Christ will come again. We hear that God has come to us in Jesus Christ. That he has died to take away sin, but more, that he has passed through death to open up everlasting life to us. We hear this news and the call, "Because of this true story, repent and believe this good news." Something happens. We get made new. We get connected. It's a profound miracle and yet it happens again and again among the most ordinary people. Paul described it this way to the Romans, "The word is near you, in your mouth and in your heart...because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved... For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved'... So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ" (Romans 10: 8-9, 13, 17).

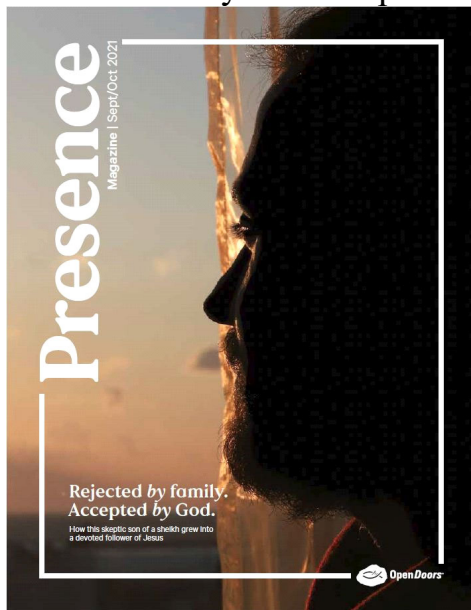
This wonder can occur every time we gather around Scripture. And it has far less to do with the preacher or the teacher than with God's Holy Spirit. That's why it's so important to pray. "Lord, speak to me today! I believe Scripture is your Word to us. Make it a living Word to me this day." If you do that, even the most mediocre sermon can bring you to a living encounter. Even if the teacher stinks, if you just look at the text, asking God to speak and applying your mind and heart to receive it, you will hear from God!

And that's an important spiritual diagnostic for us. Do you hardly even leave here moved? Do you feel like a message is something to survive while you think of other things? Does it feel like all this Bible talk is an impenetrable mass of tangled ideas? Try sincerely and regularly asking God to speak to you. Try preparing yourself before you come to church or Bible study by prayer and reading ahead. Try asking God to show you what's blocking you from the ordinary miracle of meeting him in his Word. For this, Paul tells us, is the Word which goes to work energizing, motivating and shaping believers.

**2) Imitators of Suffering Churches.** So Paul recalls how the Thessalonians heard the gospel and believed it. These pagan Greeks had the same transforming experiences as the Jewish believers in Israel. And they shared something else with that first believing community. Persecution. Paul tells them that they mirrored the first Christians. The first believers in Jerusalem were all Jews. And the Jewish authorities immediately rejected them for their faith in Jesus. The same thing happened to the Thessalonians. Their Greek-speaking relatives rejected them for being part of a cult. Their society viewed them as odd balls and trouble makers, bad for business and not fit for company. Paul writes, "You suffered the same things from your own countrymen as the [Jewish church] suffered from the Jews."

When people come to Christ, they have a striking experience of the reality of God. Their whole lives reorient. In places where there aren't already a lot of Christians, this vivid experience of Jesus sets them apart. They get perceived as threats, as disappointments, as weirdos. It's actually a mark of genuine Christianity. We've been insulated from that for years. But as culture changes, being a Christian will meet more and more resistance.

And that's where the persecuted church can be such a help to us. Over three hundred million Christians today live in places where they could face extreme to very extreme persecution.



The latest issue of *Presence* from Open Doors ministry tells the story of a Syrian Muslim who came to Christ. It's helpful to remember that Syrians were early adopters of Christianity. Centuries before Islam was invented, a robust Christian community thrived in Syria. Today, however, Anwar recounted how he was taught not to let any Christian enter his life. Christians were deceivers who led Muslims astray with their false ideas that the man Jesus is God, who died and rose from the dead. But during the Syrian civil war, Anwar avoided forced military service by staying in college. While there, a Christian student kept talking to him about Jesus. The strife in his country depressed Anwar. Life seemed hopeless and he felt convinced that Allah hated him. And, Anwar says, he hated Allah for allowing all this devastation to occur. He wanted to end his life. The Christian friend said, "Why not talk to Jesus and see what he has to tell you? If you still want to end your life, then you have nothing to lose but a little time."

Comforting himself that he could always take his life, Anwar tried praying to Jesus. For a while, nothing happened, and he felt like a crazy person for talking to himself. But he also felt an increasing desire to know more about this Jesus. He began watching worship services and listening to sermons. He says, "One day I was talking to him, and I started crying. I

poured my heart out to him, and suddenly I wasn't alone anymore. I have a friend: Jesus.”

Anwar had a genuine experience of Christ. Someone told him the story of Jesus and eventually he believed it. Suddenly Jesus gave him what Allah or atheism could not, a purpose for living, a sense of being heard and loved. He experienced joy. But just like the Thessalonians and the Jerusalem Christians, immediately with the joy came suffering. Anwar moved out of the family home for fear his family would disown and disinherit him if they found out about his faith in Jesus. And indeed they did. He heard that his mother had a nervous breakdown over the shock and shame of it. His siblings would not answer his calls. Finally his sister called back and said, “Don't ever come back here. My mother is in the hospital because of you. You are no longer my brother.” Anwar had to make a transition from connection to his family to finding support in a Christian community. He does not regret his faith, “Jesus is everything to me. When I had no one, he was with me: my brother, my companion, my best friend. I talk to him all the time. I rely on him. Jesus truly saved my life...Now I've met a new family in the church; they make up for the things I have lost.”

The persecuted church gives us another important diagnostic for our own spiritual lives. Is my experience of Jesus enough should I be rejected for this faith? Are my relationships with other believers of such depth and genuine connection that they are truly my family? Of course you can't really know just by speculating, but again we can ask ourselves, “Does Jesus seem to mean to me what he does to Anwar and the Thessalonians?”



**3) Rejection Triggers Wrath.** Remember that Paul was once a fierce persecutor of Christians. He was responsible for many imprisonments and even deaths. So we know he felt the pangs of his former life as he recalled what the Jewish authorities, like himself, had done to Jesus. He saw that Gentile authorities in Thessalonica also did the same

thing. The gospel demands as well as offers change in our lives. People for whom the world is working quite often resist the gospel for just that reason. And so their very place of power ends up hindering the spread of the news. They keep people from knowing salvation in Jesus. And that triggers the wrath of God.

But let's examine this wrath a bit. We're very quick to think that the Triune God is like Zeus, eager to hurl thunderbolts on misbehaving humans. Or that God is a judge more eager to protect his rights of law than to save people. But what if the wrath of God is much deeper, much more organic than that?

I read an article recently that had a great hook. It asked, "What if Christianity actually creates more atheism?" What? That got my attention. The article got me to think more deeply about what it means that God entered the world as the man Jesus Christ. Too often, we believers think that all that matters is Jesus died to pay the debt of sin. He only lived in order to die so we could get the heaven box checked. We overlook the profound implications of God who takes the stuff of creation into his very life. When God comes to us as Jesus, he says Yes to the people he has created. Yes, I love you enough that I want to be one of you, in flesh and blood, forever. He also says Yes to all creation. The Greek intellectuals trivialized matter. They thought only the mind and spirit counted. Flesh and blood was just a mistake, so what you did with it didn't matter. But in the incarnation, God said something different. "I like the world I made. I like all of it. In fact, I am claiming back all of creation. My Yes to flesh and blood is my saying to everything I made, "Mine! This is mine. It does not belong to evil. It does not belong to egos. It does not belong to Caesar. It belongs to me. I made it. Now I claim it. I'll die for it so I can remake it. Recreate it. Behold, I make all things new."

Let's think hard about what this means. Think of the things people choose over God. I don't need God; I'll just rely on science. Christianity replies, "Sorry pal, you don't get science. Science probes the mysteries of energy, force and matter. And all of that belongs now to Jesus. God reclaimed everything." Someone else says, "I don't need God. I go to church in nature." And we reply, "Sorry, pal, you don't get nature. Jesus is the Lord of nature as he showed among us. He made it all and it's all for his glory.

You can't have nature without Jesus." Someone else says, "I'll just live for sex and art and vivid experience." And we reply, "Not without God you won't. Sex is just a pointer to the union of Jesus with his church. Live for sex without God and it will turn destructive on you. Art for its own sake will leave you empty. Vivid experiences will stimulate you but without God you'll never realize the point."

Since Christ came and reclaimed all creation, there is no place for us to hide. To reject Jesus is to reject all that belongs to him: creation, relationship, science, art, meaning, purpose and future. If you are honest, Jesus doesn't leave you anything else but futility and destruction: nihilism. Atheist regimes always create ugliness. They always excel in death. They grind people in misery. Because apart from the one true God there simply is no life. So yes, by arriving in our midst, Jesus ratcheted up the stakes. Give your life to him and enter life. Reject him and trigger the wrath of non-being. All other gods have been exposed as posers. There's nothing left for you but futile misery. Grace is free, but it is also fire. It incinerates human ego, the will to power, the claim to be our own gods. The real question is our final diagnostic. Is the fire of grace serving to purify you or destroy you?

The Thessalonians and Anwar paid the price and found it worth it. Apart from Jesus we have no good. He holds in the deeps. He has reclaimed all creation. To reject him is to choose a steady march to non-existence. Do we know that, or are we still trying to fool around with extra, lesser, alternate gods? Is he worth everything to you? Or will you seek something else and end up with nothing in your hands?