

A Model Belief

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Preacher: Dave Abraham

[0 : 00] Keep 1 Thessalonians chapter 2 open in front of you. There's an outline in the bulletins. If I haven't met yet, my name's Dave. I'm one of the pastors here. And I'm actually just preaching on verses 13 to 16.

So we've got four verses that we're going to look at in more detail this morning. Let's pray. Father, we do thank you for your word, that we have it before us, that it is the word of God.

We pray that as we hear it, as we think about it, as we consider it, as we trust it, as we believe it, that you might teach us, you might encourage us, you might transform us, that we might imitate the Lord Jesus and the churches that are in you, that we might be your people and continue to grow in you.

Amen. That's the question that I have for us this morning. How is it that we actually do grow as Christians? Have you ever had a time in your life where you felt stagnant as a Christian?

Like you're stuck somewhere, you're still trusting Jesus, you're still turning up to church, but don't really feel like you're growing as a Christian. How do we live when we know trusting in Christ is the most important thing in this world, and we get on with life in the midst of a world that rejects Jesus and doesn't want us to talk about Him?

[1 : 26] So the Thessalonians had had Paul come along for three weeks, preach Christ and then leave. And now the believers are being attacked, they're being afflicted.

But Paul says, chapter 2, verse 1, for you yourselves know, brothers, that are coming to you was not in vain. Certainly looks like it was from the outside.

It certainly could have been in terms of he was there, he tried to preach this new message, he got kicked out of town, and where's the power in that message anyway?

That's what it looks like. Why was it not in vain? Why was it not a failure? Well, Paul tells us it's because the Word of God is at work in them.

Even as the world is at work against them. That's how we grow. That's how God continues to shape us. And this passage, I think, will help us both continue thinking about that, and also how do we live in the midst of this world that does afflict us.

[2 : 28] So, so far in 1 Thessalonians, Paul has thanked God for them, for their love, their faith, their hope, their work and endurance that it's produced. He's expressed this confidence in their salvation.

How they've turned from idols to serve the living and true God, wait for His Son from heaven. He's expressed, look, they can have confidence in the messages that brought them the Gospel, and in the Gospel message that has come to them.

And now here, he's thanking God for them again. In the midst of that, he's giving them a strange sort of encouragement too. That God's wrath has come.

This passage has a lot to say to us, that it's the Word that is at work in us, even as the world is at work against us. And there's encouragement and exultation for us in that.

And so, chapter 2, verse 13. 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.

[3 : 38] And so, the first half of this verse, they received the Word of God, which they heard from Paul and Kay, raises the question, what is the Word of God that he's referring to? It's not the Old Testament Scriptures.

It's not what he's talking about. Because Paul went to the synagogue on three Sabbaths and preached. They already had the Old Testament at the synagogue, before Paul got there. Rather, the Word of God that they heard from Paul is the Gospel.

And so, we can see that already in the letter. So, chapter 1, verse 4. Paul says, In chapter 2, there's a few verses there as well.

So, chapter 2, verse 2. In midst of much conflict. Verse 8. So, being affectionately desirous of you, we are ready to share not only the Gospel of God, but also our very own selves.

And verse 9. We worked night and day that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaim to you the Gospel of God. So, what's the word that Thessalonians have received?

[4 : 54] It's the Gospel of God. And what is that Gospel? What's this good news? Acts 17 tells us about when Paul went to the Thessalonians. Let me just read to you.

Acts 17, verse 2, says this. Paul went in to the synagogue, as was his custom, and on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ.

So, Scripture is showing that Jesus is the Christ. The long-awaited promised forever king had to suffer, die, then rise from the dead. Paul's explaining, proving, showing, proclaiming that Jesus is the risen King.

That's the good news. There is a King. He's been promised from long ago. He's come back to life again. He delivers us from the wrath to come. So, they've received this Word of God, which they heard from Paul and Silas.

That Word was the Gospel of God. Jesus is the risen King. And so, what does Paul do? He thanks God constantly that they've received that. Look at the second part of verse 13.

[6 : 08] You accepted it not as the Word of men, but as what it really is, the Word of God. And so, the Word was delivered by men, but it wasn't man's Word.

Just like a messenger might deliver a word from a king, it's not the messenger's word, it's the king's word. This is a message from God. And to accept it as such is to shape your whole life around it. It's to go, well, actually, if God said something, I'm going to really listen to that, isn't it? To not do that is to not really accept it from God, isn't it? It's to not take it as a bit of, you know, self-help advice or a bit of meaning that someone might find in the world somehow.

But it's the Word of truth and meaning and purpose. It's a good word which is for all people. It's a word given by God that His Son is the Christ, risen from the dead. And it's a word that changes your life.

It's the word that changes the world. So have a look at the last bit of verse 13 then. Because to receive God's Word, it's not all that we do with it, but it says, 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.

[7 : 29] This Word changes your life. Once you've heard it, it continues to be at work in your life. So then that raises the question, okay, well, how does God's Word work within us?

And I think this is important because sometimes we can use shorthand comments about the power of God's Word, which are true, and we can actually put them together in the wrong way.

Or we can even hear, you know, a fantastic quote that Josh loves, and it's a great quote, with Luther having a beer with Philip and the Word just does the work. It's true, but what do we mean? We don't want to put that together in the wrong way. It's not that God's Word just kind of, I've heard it and now it just works in me by magic or some special mysterious process. If I were to think, you know, it's important for me to be at church, I hear God's Word, it's important for me to go, read God's Word for myself, good, done that, and then I just assume, oh yeah, it's just working, because I've heard it.

That's just treating it as a magic talisman, isn't it? That's just superstition. How does God's Word actually be at work? There's two things to say.

[8 : 38] Firstly, the Word works the same way as any other word works. It works as a word. It's got meaning. That is, if you don't hear it, it does you no good.

If you ignore it, it does you no good. It's as you listen to it, it's as you think about it, it's as you consider it, it's as you submit to it, it's as you obey it, it's as you trust it, that's when the Word is at work.

So imagine, right, if someone has told me, you know Dave, you've got a big nose, and if I shrug and I give it another thought, that Word does no work in my life. But I might think, oh, you know what, my nose is kind of actually big.

Oh, maybe everyone's actually thinking about my nose. Maybe that's all I see when they see me, is just my giant nose. And now I'm really self-conscious, and, you know, the word of that inside is working in me, and I'm growing increasingly insecure.

Or maybe I'm going, oh, maybe that was a song on song reference, and it's like, oh, my amazing good looks. And I, oh, maybe the Word is doing a different work in me there. But that's how words work, isn't it?

[9 : 41] Right, you hear a word, and if you chuck it out, the Word does no work. They have to be comprehended, and acted on, for them to do any work. That too, is how God's Word works.

However, the second thing that needs to be said, is that God's Word, comes with the Holy Spirit, the power of God. It's a word, of resurrection, and transformation. That is not that, words work any differently.

God is using words, because that's how words work. But this Word, is able to save, because this Word, is about, the risen King Jesus. This Word is about, the Lord who rescues us, from the wrath to come.

A self-help Word, might give you, you know, I don't know, power to be mindful, or improve some aspect of yourself, in some way, but, but only God's Word, has power to save.

Because, that Word, is that Jesus, the Christ, He's risen from the dead, He's coming again from heaven, He's saved us from the coming wrath, we serve the living and true God, we wait, for our King to come.

[10 : 48] This Word actually, transforms us. It comes with the power, of the Holy Spirit, to actually, live in such a way, as to please God. To actually be, raised from death, to life.

This Word, is truth. It's from God. And so, this Word works, in the way that words do, with the power of the Holy Spirit, to actually change our lives, so that we obey it, consider it, understand the implications, hold fast to our King, come what may.

We trust it. We believe it. We live with faith, and love, and hope, because the Word, is at work in us, who believe. So, what do we do with that then?

Well, we put God's Word to work. Hear it. Listen to it. Consider it. Ruminates on it. Submit to it. Think about it. Obey it. Trust it. Consider the implications for your life.

Consider the implications for your family. Read God's Word with your kids. Talk about it with them. You've got to be doing that. And actually, we're doing 1 Thessalonians here, and the kids are doing 1 Thessalonians.

[11 : 58] And so, if you've got kids here, use that in your family, to have God's Word at work. And, here's a tip for parents, right? If your child asks you a question, sorry, if you want to find out what your kids learnt, and you ask them a question like, hey, what did you learn at kids' church today?

It's such an abstract question, it's basically impossible for a kid to answer that, right? So, instead, tell them something that you've learnt. Tell them, hey, here's a verse from today that I learnt, and here's one thing that God taught me or reminded me of.

And you never know, maybe they've learnt exactly the same thing at kids' church. Or, it actually just gives them something concrete to actually go, oh yeah, something similar happened to me.

I learnt something like that too. They might be able to talk about that as well. We've got the very words of God, not words made up by someone, which can give as much help as someone might be able to give, but we've got the Word of God, which can give as much help as God can give.

He's able to save and transform, utterly, our lives. We've got amazingly good news, don't we? The promised King has come. He's risen from the dead.

[13 : 07] There actually is a resurrection. You can know that you're saved. The Holy Spirit is living in you. We can serve the living and true God, whatever the world around you says. So how are we putting this Word into practice in our lives?

Not just hearing it, but considering it and acting in accordance with it. Believing the Gospel of God, putting our trust in it. How do we do that? How does it actually shape us?

Because that's how we grow when the Word is at work in us. So the second main point of this chunk here is that the world is at work against us.

And Paul thanks God for the Thessalonians accepting God's Word. And what is the work that God produces? Well, here in these verses, it's the work of imitation.

So look at verse 14. For you, brothers, became imitators of the Church of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. Paul has already said how the Thessalonians have become imitators of them, of Paul

and Silas, and of Jesus, back in chapter 1, verse 6.

[14:17] And now here, he's saying that they're imitators of the churches of Judea. And the Gospel should produce in us an imitation. We were designed to actually copy others.

Any thought of, you know, I'm not going to imitate anyone, I'm just going to be myself, apart from, you know, imitating the spirit of this age, it doesn't mean that you will actually just be yourself, it just means that you'll imitate people unthinkingly and stupidly.

And as I tell the youth, you know, you will imitate people, it's going to happen, so actually choose who you're going to imitate. As they are like Jesus, be like them. Find someone to model and try and be a bit like them, deliberately, because you're going to do it anyway.

In this case, it wasn't really deliberately imitating the churches of Judea, was it? But rather, they copied the same suffering that the Judean Christians did, which Paul and the Lord also suffered. So verse 14 again, for you brothers became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews.

[15:24] So the Judean churches have suffered at the hands of the Jews and the Thessalonians have suffered the same kind of things from the Macedonians, their own countrymen. And so for us, expect suffering.

As we imitate Christ, as the word is at work within us, we should expect that the world will be at work against us. And Paul speaks of what the Jews have done.

Verse 14, you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out and displeased God and opposed all mankind.

At every step, they've actually opposed God. They killed the prophets, warning of judgment and calling for repentance. They killed God's own son, their prophesied king.

They drove out the apostles, calling them to actually repent and believe in this killed but risen king who died to save them. And then, they persecuted other Jews who actually believed that Jesus is the king and they hindered the gospel going out.

[16:31] What do they do? You see in verse 15 there? They displease God and oppose all mankind by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved.

Paul's not pulling his punches here, is he? Notice this is also the opposite of what he's saying about himself. Right, in chapter 2, verse 4, it says, but just as we've been approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel, so we speak not to please man but to please God who tests our hearts. And Paul puts himself in that same line as Jesus and the prophets. Right? That the Jews have actually killed Jesus, killed the prophets, driven them out.

He is working to please God with the word of God. By their actions, they do two things.

They displease God but rather, Paul is speaking to please God and actually, in chapter 4, verse 1, Paul says the Thessalonians themselves are pleasing God but the Jews cause God to be displeased and then secondly, they oppose all mankind.

[17:43] They actually act opposite to what is in the best interest of humanity because they're hindering Paul and his friends from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved. Now, this of course isn't exclusive to the Jews by any means.

In fact, Paul's point here is that the Thessalonians are suffering the very same thing from their countrymen and so we should expect the same thing from ours. And have you noticed that sometimes opposing Christians is pitched as the reasonable kind of thing to do and Christians are actually the bad guys.

You know, I accept all people equally, Christians are the haters. I am scientific and rational and intelligent. It's Christians who have a blind and stupid faith. Christianity has no place in the public sphere or schools because it's trying to brainwash children into believing an invisible friend in the sky.

But actually, it's Christians who love all men. It's we who work in the best interest of humanity speaking to all that they might be saved.

Christians are the true humanitarians. It's those who would seek to hinder us that are the haters, that are anti-human, that are anti-God.

[19:00] And we should expect such opposition. Now, I think sometimes when we talk about suffering for the Gospel, we can get a little tangled. We think, you know, I'm not getting hacked with

machetes like some Christians are.

I'm not having my belongings confiscated like other Christians in the world, I'm not in fear of my life, but I'm kind of actually pretty comfortable. Maybe I shouldn't be, but then I shouldn't be on the lookout to deliberately try and suffer.

So, what does that mean for me now, as a Christian and suffering and so on? I think these verses help us. Look at verse 15-16.

How is it that the Jews displease God and oppose all mankind? By hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved. What's the opposition?

It's actually stopping the Gospel going out. Now, you might not be suffering the same affliction of the Thessalonians, but you are being opposed. And I wonder if you've felt that.

[20 : 08] Have you felt the need to self-censor among friends? Is there a policy at work which makes it hard to express what you believe about Jesus and the implications for life? Or to share that word with others?

Is there someone who shuts you down, tells you they don't want to hear about whatever it is and maybe we should actually just talk about the weather or American politics or something random instead? Do you sometimes just feel uncertain about what you can or can't say because of the current climate that we live in?

Maybe society's Overton window has moved so that speaking about Jesus just, it feels unsafe and like it's unacceptable speech. Are you hindered from speaking the word of God?

Are you hindered from speaking the gospel there is in Jesus? Because we're certainly being opposed in that space, aren't we? And if you haven't felt hindered in sharing the gospel at all, well, firstly check, have you tried to share the gospel?

Is there a lack of opposition because there's nothing to oppose? If we do self-censor to the point where we're no longer proclaiming Christ and then wonder why there's no opposition, well, that's pretty obvious.

[21 : 18] But rather, as we do seek to live for Christ, as we have the word at work in us, conforming us to be more like Jesus, as we imitate and model him, model the Thessalonian church, we too will find ourselves hindered by those who oppose mankind and displease God.

And so, know that that's what we should expect and we should expect it more as we grow deeper in our imitation of Christ, a change by the word of the gospel to live, to please God and for the good of mankind.

So, make no mistake here that the Jews were wicked, they were evil, anti-human, anti-God, but also note the Gentiles were doing the same thing to the Thessalonian church and we should expect the same thing too.

Paul's point is not anti-Semitism but rather, just as the Jews are evil and face judgment, so too will those who oppose the Thessalonian church and so too are those today who hinder speaking the gospel.

And look at what Paul says about the Jews there in verse 16. They hinder us from speaking to the Gentiles, they might be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins but wrath has come upon them at last.

[22 : 41] It's a tricky little bit, we'll unpack this carefully but don't lose sight of the point. You Thessalonians have received God's word as God's word, it's at work in you and while it's working in you, you are being opposed but you haven't made a mistake, it's the same thing that happened to the prophets, it's the same thing that happened to Jesus, it's the same thing that happened to us, Paul and company, it's the same thing that happened to the Judean churches and so if you're suffering affliction, Thessalonian church, for believing God's word, you're on the right track.

Welcome to the party. But those who are opposed to you, they're judged by God. So stay the course, stand firm, keep going, don't lose your confidence.

And so Paul is using the example of the Jews here to encourage the Thessalonians in their affliction. Why is he talking about the Jews here?

Particularly because their rap sheet is so long, isn't it? They're an example to the Gentiles who are acting in the same way. So the first phrase there, so it was always to fill up the measure of their sins.

It's a picture of having sins being piled up, piled up, piled up and there is some sort of a limit, some sort of measurement that they can stack up to, some level of completion.

[24 : 06] And it's a picture that's used in Genesis 15, Abram's just been told in Genesis 15, look up and count the stars and that's how many offspring you're going to have. And then God tells him, your offspring are actually going to go off to a foreign country and be slaves for four generations before they actually come back to this land that I've promised you.

Why is it going to take that long for them to actually come back into this land? And God tells Abram, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete.

So there's some measure of sin that in four generations time is going to be time for judgment for the Amorites, but it's not yet. And here is that same kind of picture, the Jews have been filling up the measure of their sins to completion.

So God is patient until iniquity reaches that completion and then there is judgment. But we read here that wrath has come upon them at last.

So what does that mean? That's a bit of a weird phrase, how do we understand that? And I think there's four ways that it's been understood and so I'll try and unpack these briefly.

[25 : 17] But firstly I think that's a pretty good translation, what you've got there. You could say something like wrath arrived on them and the at last is literally kind of until the end.

It could be at last or it could be to completion, to the fullest. In context I think our English translation is a pretty good one. It's not future tense or anything like that.

So what do we do with it? How do we understand it? What wrath and when? So four main options. Firstly, one option is it's some sort of temporal judgment that's already happened.

So there was a massacre at the temple in about AD 48 where thousands of Jews were killed.

Maybe that's the wrath that's been talked about or Claudius kicked all the Jews out of Rome and so maybe that's the judgment that's been talked about or maybe there's some other disaster that's kind of happened in the world that Paul and the Thessalonians know about and wrath has come upon them at last.

You can see it. I don't think that's what's in view here. Mostly that's because of what Paul says about wrath in 1 Thessalonians and in 2 Thessalonians which I'll come to shortly.

[26 : 28] But he's looking towards that final day. There is a day of wrath coming. Secondly, a second option is one of temporal judgment that is yet to come. So the idea is that Paul is speaking of the destruction of Jerusalem and the destruction of the temple that happens in AD 70 but it hasn't happened yet but he's speaking about it with such certainty that it will happen that he kind of speaks in the past tense about a future event.

I don't think that makes any sense because the original readers would have no idea what he's talking about. He's talking about this future thing, wrath has come but it hasn't, what do you mean? So then thirdly, that this is actually speaking of the final judgment.

That Paul is using the past tense here to emphasise the certainty of judgment that's to come upon the Jews. And so Paul does speak about this judgment to come, this wrath, a few times in this letter.

So chapter 1 verse 10, go back there, chapter 1 verse 10, right at the end, wait for his son from heaven whom he raised from the dead, Jesus, who delivers us from the wrath to come.

Or in 4 verse 4, the Lord is an avenger. In 5 verse 3, while people are saying there is peace and safety, then sudden destruction will come upon them as labour pain has come upon a pregnant woman and they will not escape.

[27 : 48] And 2 Thessalonians speaks even more about this wrath to come, of Jesus inflicting vengeance on those who don't know God and those who don't obey the gospel. They'll suffer punishment of eternal destruction away from the presence of the Lord.

And so Paul certainly has that view of wrath and judgment in mind, which is talking about that wrath on the last day. But what does he mean when he says wrath has arrived or wrath has come upon them?

What I put to you is that that wrath that's come on them at last is that their rejection of the gospel, that it is a full rejection of the gospel and they've been hardened by God so as not to be saved.

And they are just facing that final judgment that's to come. That is the Jews having killed the prophets who told them to repent, who brought God's word to them.

Instead of having it, accepting it as the word of God and having it at work within them, rejected it and killed the prophets. And then Jesus comes as the word of God and instead of accepting it as the word of God, rejected and actually killed the word of God.

[29 : 02] And then the apostles come who brought to them the word of God and instead of accepting it and receiving it, they've driven them out. And then they're persecuting their fellow Jews who have actually received this word and they're stopping, they're hindering this word going out that Gentiles might be saved.

And so now God's wrath has come upon them. There is no other prophet coming for them. There is no further word coming to them. They're reprobate.

They're destined for hell. Having trampled underfoot the Son of God, there's now just fearful expectation of judgment and a fury of fire that will consume the adversaries. They've been handed over in God's wrath to the consequences of their own actions.

Romans 1 speaks of wrath in this kind of way. So the wrath of God in 1 verse 18 is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men.

And in Romans 1 it's particularly talking about Gentiles, but what's the form of the wrath? God's wrath is revealed against them by giving them up to what their darkened heart desires and all the evil that's in it.

[30 : 16] And I think that's the same expression of wrath here. The Jews have rejected God so much that God has handed them over to their own rejection in his wrath against them. And Romans 11 makes that exact point about the Jews.

Paul points out God hasn't abandoned Israel because there's still a saved remnant including himself and that would also include these Judean churches. And then Paul says this in Romans chapter 11 verse 7.

Just go there quickly with me. Romans chapter 11. Verse 7. Paul says what then?

Israel failed to obtain what it was seeking. The elect obtained it but the rest were hardened. As it is written God gave them a spirit of stupor.

Eyes that would not be able to see and ears that would not hear down to this very day. And David said let their table become a snare and a trap, a stumbling block, and a retribution for them.

[31 : 22] Let their eyes be darkened so they cannot see and bend their backs forever. So this wrath of God that has come upon the Jews is a hardening.

They've killed the prophets who told them to repent, they've killed their own Lord and King, God's own Son. When it's been explained to them who Jesus is, what they've done, that salvation comes through him, like many of them were cut to the heart, they repented.

But many instead drove the apostles away, refused to believe, hindered them from speaking to the Gentiles and then persecuted the Jewish Christians. And so as they rejected God and rejected God and rejected God and rejected God, God has now handed them over to be hardened in their rejection to a place where they won't accept the gospel or be saved but are only awaiting vengeance of Christ and the affliction from God when Jesus is revealed in flaming fire.

God knows what is happening.

The Jews who have rejected God and opposed mankind have suffered God's wrath being hardened to do what they wanted to do. And the Gentiles who afflicted the church at Thessalonica will, unless they repent before they fill up in the measure of their sins, suffer the same fate too.

[32 : 45] So Thessalonians, stand firm. You aren't on the wrong side of history though you've been afflicted. God will judge those who oppose you. And there's a comfort in those in there.

That if we are afflicted, God will judge. God knows what's going on. His wrath will come. The word being at work within you is the only thing that actually causes the world to oppose you.

And the only way to stand in the face of that opposition is to have God's work at work in you, God's word at work in you. The Thessalonians and we too have the word of God at work in us.

So listen to God. Receive it as the word of God. Speak it, teach it to your children. This is how we grow as Christians, this is how we live in Christ, submit to it, live it out, trust it, be conformed to Christ, imitate those who have gone before us in having the word at work and so be a model ourselves as we imitate for our children, for churches yet to be planted, to be imitating.

Jesus is Lord, he is risen from the dead and he delivers us from the wrath to come. And while the word is at work within us, the world is at work against us, people who displease God and oppose mankind hinder us from speaking so the people might be saved.

[34 : 09] Don't be discouraged. God knows that's what's happening. Expect that hindrance and opposition, that is just what happened to Jesus, it's what happened to Paul, it's what happened to the Judean churches, it's what happened to the Thessalonian churches.

God's word is at work within us as we live and trust and imitate Christ in the churches of God in Christ Jesus. us, that we might stand firm for Christ and the word might go out from us to the world despite the hindrance that is against us.

Let's pray. Father, we thank you for the word, that we have your word, the gospel of the risen King Jesus.

We thank you that it is a work within us to change, to transform us, that we might imitate the Lord Jesus, the apostles, other churches.

Pray that we might continue to grow in Christ as this word is at work within us. Father, in the midst of this, the world is at work against us to hinder the gospel going out, the people might be saved.

[35 : 22] Pray that we might not be faint-hearted in this, that we might expect it, that we might continue to have the word at work in us, that we might stand in the face of the world being at work against us.

We might proclaim your gospel as we speak to others and might be work within us and from us as the word continues the work that you've set it to do.

Amen.