

1 Thessalonians 2:13-20 “Receiving the Word of God”
Jeremiah 6:10-30
Psalm 116

October 29, 2023

Thirty-four years ago I was a freshman in college,
sitting with my guitar as I read the book of Jeremiah.

These words echoed through my soul – and a tune came to mind as I played.
If you’ve ever heard me tuning my guitar on a Sunday morning,
you’ve heard the tune.

When I was a freshman in college, I had no idea that I would ever be a pastor –
but “to whom shall I speak and give warning?” echoed in my soul.

“Stand by the crossroads and look, and ask for the ancient paths,
where the good way is; and walk in it, and find rest for your souls...”

and the refrain came from chapter 8, verse 8 –

“How can you say, ‘We are wise, for we have the law of the LORD;
when the lying pen of the scribes has handled it falsely.
The wise will be put to shame, they have rejected the word of the LORD,
what kind of wisdom do they have?’”

And so every Sunday, as I tune my guitar, I am reflecting on Jeremiah’s warning to preachers!

Our Psalm of response is Psalm 116 –
which rejoices that the LORD himself is our hope and our deliverer!

Sing TPH 116A
Read 1 Thessalonians 2

“You are our glory and joy.”

The last year has been – by far – the most difficult of my life.
But I would not trade it for anything under heaven.

I have learned a little about myself –
and much more about the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

A significant part of what I have learned is captured in what we heard last time, when Paul says
“we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God
but also our own selves”
which would be better translated “our own *souls*.”

Because Paul is not talking about the “self” – but about the *soul*.
When I say “I must take care of myself!” –
the “self” stands alone – isolated – and only I can protect it.

When I say, “I must take care of my soul” –
the *soul* always stands before God – and he is my rock and my shield.

Preaching the gospel is a great and glorious thing –
but Paul says that they were pleased to impart not only the gospel of God –
but our own souls!

How do you impart your soul to another person?!!

When we are joined to the life of the Son of God –
when the Holy Spirit – the Third Person of the Holy Trinity –
joins us to the life of God –
then we are joined to one another as well.

And so not only do we impart to you the gospel of God –
but also, we impart to you our very souls.

Very imperfectly.

With much weakness – much frailty – and with much sin and repentance! –
we impart to you our own souls.

This is how Paul and Silas and Timothy walked among the Thessalonians.
And this is how we, as your elders, seek to walk with you.

1. We Thank God for How You Received the Word of God (v13-16)

Notice first how Paul *thinks God constantly* for how the Thessalonians received the word of God.
Gratitude is important!

As I have talked with other pastors over the years,
I am grateful to God that both churches that I have pastored
have been churches who received the word of God *as the word of God!*
When you hear the word of the Lord – you seek to put it into practice!

Thanks be to God!!

But what does Paul mean when he says that their preaching *really is* the word of God?

a. Faithful Preaching Is the Word of God (v13a)

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,*

Throughout the Bible there are three things that are called “the word of God”:

- 1) the scriptures are sometimes referred to as the “word of God” – Acts 15; John 15:25
- 2) the second person of the Trinity – the eternal Son of God – is called the Word (John 1, 1 John 1, 1 Peter 1:23)
- 3) but by far, the most common meaning of the “the word of God” is preaching

Let me give you a few examples:

Acts 4:31 - And when they had prayed, the place in which they were gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and continued to speak the **word of God** with boldness.

Acts 6: 7 - And the **word of God** continued to increase, and the number **of** the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many **of** the priests became obedient to the faith.

Paul uses this way of talking quite regularly:

Ephesians 1:13-14 - In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit, ¹⁴ who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory.

Philippians 2:16 – [Paul urges them to] hold fast to the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I may be proud that I did not run in vain or labor in vain.

You'll notice some parallels here to our passage.

Paul sees his preaching as nothing less than the word of God.

You might say – of course – that's because Paul is an apostle!

That is true.

But that's where Hebrews 13:7 comes in:

Hebrews 13:7 - Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the **word of God**. Consider the outcome **of** their way **of** life, and imitate their faith.

It's not just the apostles.

It's every minister of the gospel who speaks the word of God.

The apostolic word is the standard by which all other words are measured –

but every time a pastor preaches faithfully to the scriptures,

he is speaking the word of God!

So scripture is the word of God –

preaching is the word of God –

and the second person of the Trinity is the Word of God.

These three aspects of the Word

are all woven together so that they are – at heart – one, just as God himself is one.

At the heart of all other meanings, the Word of God is the eternal Son of God.

In the beginning was the Word – and the Word was with God – and the Word was God.

Scripture and preaching are the word of God because they bear witness to him.

Yes, scripture *is* the word of God – because God inspired it.

But if you abstract scripture from Jesus –

then you will go astray.

As Jesus himself told the Jews,

“You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life;

and it is they that bear witness about me,” (John 5:39)

If you read the scriptures apart from Jesus – you won't read the Word of God!

Protestants sometimes say that the Bible is the supreme authority in our churches – but that's not *quite* the right way to say it.

Our own Confession of Faith says it this way:

WCF 1.10. The supreme judge by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.

Notice how we say it:

“The supreme judge...can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture.”

The Bible is not the highest authority.
God is.

God the Holy Spirit is the supreme judge in controversies of religion.
How are we to know what the Holy Spirit says about an issue?
Look at what he says in the Scriptures.

And third, preaching is also the word of God.

What I do in the proclamation of the gospel is *preach the word*.

I am a herald sent by King Jesus to announce to you the good news –
that his kingdom has come!

So you could say it this way:

We know the Word (Christ) only from the Scripture and the preaching that is based on scripture

We know the written word only through the Word (Christ)
who makes the preached word possible!

And we know the preached word only by knowing the Word (Christ)
who is attested in the scriptures.

This is what our Shorter Catechism is getting at in question 89,
The Spirit of God makes the reading, but especially the preaching, of the word,
an effectual means of convincing and converting sinners,
and building them up in holiness and comfort, through faith, unto salvation.

The incarnation of the Word – when the Word became flesh and dwelt among us –
is what establishes scripture and preaching as the word of God –
but he comes to us only in the scripture and preaching.

Now when I say “preaching”
remember that I'm not just talking about what happens on Sunday morning!

As we heard from Paul last time –

“we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God
but also our own souls...”

Because when the Word became flesh He joined Himself to our humanity.

And when he poured out his Holy Spirit upon us
he joined us to himself!

If you are *in Christ* – then you have been joined to the life of the eternal Word!

And the preaching of the Word comes to us both publicly here on Sunday morning –
and throughout the week in what David Powlison calls

“the interpersonal ministry of the word.”

And this is what every Christian shares in!

Pastor Pinegar and I may be the ones who preach regularly.

Dr. Sunshine is also an ordained minister – so he also preaches for us from time to time.

But every Christian has been joined to the life of the eternal Word –

and so the words that you speak to one another

are life-giving (at least – they should be!! –

and when our words are not life-giving, we need to repent and believe the gospel!)

But this is why we try to be careful not to just spout our own opinions from the pulpit.

The preacher needs to always remember that what he is preaching
is nothing less than the word of God!

If a preacher just gives you his opinion – and cannot show that this is what *God says* –
then he is not preaching faithfully.

And that is also why Paul – and Hebrews –

emphasize the importance of how the preacher *lives* as well.

In the Great Commission Jesus did not merely say,

“teaching them all that I have commanded you” –

He said, “teaching them *to observe* all that I have commanded you.”

It’s not enough to impart the gospel of God.

The preacher must also impart his own soul.

Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

It’s what we saw last time with how Paul and Silas and Timothy lived before the Thessalonians

“we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother taking care of her own children...

[and] like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you

and encouraged you and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God,

who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.” (2:7, 11-12)

And when we fail at this –

we repent and believe the same gospel that we preach!

I also want to highlight what Paul says at the end of verse 13:

b. The Preaching of the Word Operates by Faith (v13b)

*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.***

The word of God is at work in you who believe.

Faith is necessary to receive all the benefits of Christ.

You have to believe the word that you hear.

Without faith it is not possible to please God.

I know that this can feel impossible.

When you are plagued by doubts, you feel as though you can never actually believe!

So what do you do?

Notice how Paul says it – “the word of God, which is at work in you believers.”

The preaching of the Word operates by faith.

But notice what is at work here!

The word is at work in you who believe!

If it was just the word of man, it would be powerless.

But it is not just the word of man!

It is the word of God!

And God’s word is living and active – sharper than a two-edged sword –
as Hebrews 4:12 says.

The word of God discerns the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

Because the *preached word* is the working of the living and active Word –
the very Word who became flesh and dwelt among us.

And that is why it is important for those who face doubts

to continue to hear the preaching of the Word!

Because Jesus himself is at work in the preaching of his gospel.

The Holy Spirit is the presence of the exalted Christ with his people –

and so when you are doubting and wondering –

keep hearing!

Keep listening!

Because we see the fruit of faith in what happens in those who hear (v14)

c. The Fruit of Faith: “You Became Imitators of the Churches of God” (v14)

¹⁴For 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,

Wherever the gospel goes – the result is the same:

the preaching of the word creates a division between those who believe – and those who don’t.

Isaac had twin sons –

Jacob believed – Esau didn't.

Moses sent out twelve spies –

two believed – ten didn't.

Jesus had twelve apostles –

eleven believed – one didn't! (hey, that's a better ratio!!)

Over the course of the first couple centuries – a remarkable number of Jews believed in Jesus.

But some refused to believe.

Likewise, by the end of the fourth century, around half of the Roman empire believed –

But many did not.

And as the gospel has continued to go forth throughout the nations,

the same pattern has repeated.

“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.”

Those who believe in the Lord Jesus will follow the same path that he did.

A servant is not greater than his master.

If they persecuted Jesus – they will persecute you.

Now that doesn't mean that we should get a persecution complex!

If we whine and grumble about being persecuted,

then we are not imitating our brothers who imitated Christ!

We should *rejoice* that we are counted worthy to suffer for the name of Christ!

Notice how Paul says it in verse 15-16

**d. Those Who Oppose the Gospel Oppose “All Mankind” to Their Own Destruction
(v15-16)**

¹⁵ *who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind* ¹⁶ *by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!*

God *will* deal with them.

But that's his job! (Not ours).

We may certainly imitate Paul – as he appealed to Roman law to protect the church.

But we need a clear perspective on what is happening.

Those who oppose you – those who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets –

“displease God and oppose all mankind.”

Do you hear that?

Their fundamental problem is that they displease God.

They do not love God with their whole heart.

(All sin is first and foremost – *against God*).

What is the biggest problem in America today?

We don't love God.

All the other issues *flow from that one*.

And when we displease God – then we *oppose all mankind*.
When we fail to love God with all our heart,
then we *also fail* to love our neighbor as ourselves.

And so those who persecute the church “oppose all mankind”
because the church is the place where mankind finds salvation!

So those who oppose the preaching of the Word
are “hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved.”

Anything that gets in the way of the mission of God –
God's purpose in bringing the gospel of Jesus to the nations –
is *hostility* to mankind.

But, Paul says, *God's wrath has come upon them at last*.
What does Paul mean by this?

How has God's wrath come upon them?
It started on the day of Pentecost – with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.
John the Baptist had said that Jesus would baptize with the Spirit and with fire.
Jesus' baptism would be a Spirit-and-fire baptism
that would save his people and consume all his enemies.

When Saul of Tarsus met Jesus on the Road to Damascus,
Saul was destroyed.
“I have been crucified with Christ” – Paul will say later.

The wrath of God is utterly destroying all of his and our enemies.
They are either destroyed by conversion –
or they will be destroyed by their refusal to convert.
Either way, God's wrath has come upon them at last.

But I don't want to end there!
Because Paul immediately points them to the present reality of hope!

2. The Present Reality of Hope – Embodied in the Church (v17-20)

a. Our Hearts Are United – Even when Distant (v17-18)

¹⁷ *But since we were torn away from you, brothers, for a short time, in person not in heart, we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you face to face, ¹⁸ because we wanted to come to you—I, Paul, again and again—but Satan hindered us.*

Notice first, in verse 17, that Paul says that they were only torn apart “in person” – not “in heart.”

And so, Paul says “we endeavored the more eagerly and with great desire to see you in person.”

(It’s the same word both times –
and in both cases, the “you” is plural, but the word “person” is singular)

We’ll look more at the details of what is going on next time (in three weeks) –
but for today I just want to focus on the theme that Paul is drawing through the chapter –
of how the word of God connects us in our souls – in our hearts –
so that in being joined to the life of God, we are also joined to one another!

That’s why I say in the outline – “the present reality of hope is embodied in the church.”
Our hearts are united – even when we are distant.
Now – Satan is a nuisance.
“Satan hindered us.”

But for Paul Satan is always a temporary nuisance –
because Jesus has won the great victory!

I had a lovely conversation with a brother pastor the other day.
He is going through deep waters right now in his own personal life.
But he is more and more seeing *the present reality of hope*.
He told me that for 20 years he has tended to focus on the “someday” of our hope.
“When Jesus returns.”

But he has realized that he has been missing the present reality of that hope.

Think about how Paul says this in verse 19:

b. Our Hope/Joy/Crown before our Lord Jesus at His Coming Is You (v19)

¹⁹ *For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?*

At first blush, you might think this is all about the future.
After all it is talking about the “coming” of our Lord Jesus –
and the crown – the joy – the hope – that is oriented toward *that day*.

But Paul is not using future tense.
This is present tense.

What *is* our hope?
We have been seeing how 1 Thessalonians is all about faith, hope, and love.
And especially about hope!

Faith is that which unites us to Christ – this is how we enter God’s kingdom.
Love is that which characterizes the Christian life – this is how we live in God’s kingdom.
But hope is that which *motivates* the Christian life – this is why we *stay* in God’s kingdom!

Why do I persevere through the most painful year of my life?
Why do I remain silent?

It is so tempting to try to vindicate myself!
But that is not the way of Christ.

What is my hope?
What is my joy?
What is my crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming?

Is it not you?

c. You Are Our Glory and Joy (v20)

²⁰ *For you are our glory and joy.*

I am grateful to our Lord Jesus Christ that he prompted Paul to use the plural for this epistle!
It reminds us that the apostle Paul did not consider himself more highly than he ought!
He thought of Silas and Timothy – his coworkers – as fully sharing in his glory and joy!

And so I will say that you are *our glory and joy*.
You are the glory and joy of myself and Pastor Pinegar,
and our brother elders,
Mark and Jay and Rex and Jacob and Dave and Pastor Joel –
and for that matter, those elders who have gone before us,
like Rolf and Shane and Andrew and Stephen
and Pastor Jon Bonomo and Pastor Blair Smith.

You are our glory and joy.
I like how Greg Beale says this,
“Just as parents have hope and confidence
that the raising of their children will reach a successful result,
so Paul has hope and confidence in parenting his spiritual children...
Not only Paul’s *joy* but also his *hope*
lies in the victorious eschatological outcome of his readers’ faith,
which is inextricably linked to the triumph of his own faith.” (p93).

Some have wondered how to square this with Paul’s statement in Galatians 6:14
that he will boast only in the cross of Christ.

Because now he is boasting in the Thessalonians!
But “they were the fruit of the preaching of the cross” –
which means that “God’s word was at work in them,
enabling them through the Spirit to believe and obey.” (p93)

Think of it this way:
“Is it always selfish to strive for something
with the goal of fulfilling our own joy and happiness?
No.
It is good when we desire our own joy in the way God says that true joy can come
because it pleases God and is the only true way of pleasing ourselves.
When our desires are in line with God’s desires,

it is a good because we reflect God's mind and heart." (Beale, 94)

Loving God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength
will result in greater joy in the present –
because your hope – the thing that you are looking for – longing for – waiting for –
is already present!!

Alas – by faith – not yet by sight!
But your hope is Jesus himself – the one who sits at the right hand of the Father –
the one who has seated you *with himself* in the heavenly places.
And when Christ – who is your life – appears, you also will appear with him in glory!

And with the present reality of that hope – there is *nothing* on this earth that can diminish your joy!