

Obstacles and Opportunities

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First Things

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Bible Text: 1 Thessalonians 2:14-20
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This morning, I want to encourage you to open your Bibles to two very distinct places both in the New Testament. We're going to begin in 1 Thessalonians 2, and then we're going to make our way to the book of Revelation 3 and 4, but we're going to spend the majority of our time today in 1 Thessalonians 2, beginning in verse 14. And if you are a guest or visitor with us today, I want to welcome you, I want to invite you to a very specific and yet very strategic journey through a book of the Bible that we know today as 1 Thessalonians. Why is this so important? Why is it so strategic? Because today, if somebody uses the word Christianity or Christian, there are so many different flavors, there are so many different expressions, there are so many creeds and convictions and debates and divisions, and yet when we come to 1 Thessalonians we actually are given a glimpse into the lives of the very first believers. This is the book of the Bible that the Lord gave his people, his church first, and what I mean by that, this is the first letter of the Apostle Paul some 20 years after the resurrection of Jesus guiding these early, these new believers. Now understand, they began as a group of 120+ in the upper room. By the time we get to 1 Thessalonians, you're actually in Acts 17 chronologically. By this time they have turned not only into hundreds but into thousands and tens of thousands, and according to verse 6 of Acts 17, they have turned the whole world upside down. That is critical to our study today. In a moment, we're going to begin in verse 14, but let me remind you about last week in verse 13. What was it that made these early Christians so distinct? What made them so different? You'll notice in verse 13 it says that when they received the words of God they did not receive them merely as words from men but as the words of God, and just like in their day, in this day if you subscribe to "Thus saith the Lord," if you weigh every decision, every perception, and every conviction based on what God's word says or does not say, there are two things that are guaranteed to happen in your life. First and foremost, you will expect, receive, and experience what we call opposition. Secondly, you'll have an opportunity.

So today, as we turn to 1 Thessalonians 2, let me remind you that their opposition is our opposition, their opportunity is our opportunity. Today we return to the first things to remind us what God has always called us to be. Beginning verse 14 it says,

14 For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judaea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your

own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews: 15 Who both killed the Lord Jesus, and their own prophets, and have persecuted us; and they please not God, and are contrary to all men: 16 Forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved, to fill up their sins alway: for the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost. 17 But we, brethren, being taken from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavoured the more abundantly to see your face with great desire. 18 Wherefore we would have come unto you, even I Paul, once and again; but Satan hindered us. 19 For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Are not even ye in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? 20 For ye are our glory and joy.

Now this morning, let's unpack those two concepts of opposition and opportunity. The first thing we discover is that the opposition that they faced and the opposition that we face as believers, it's very specific. Notice what he says in verse 14 and 15. He says you experienced this of your own countrymen even as I did from the Jews. Now, why is that an important designation? Because the opposition of your faith does not come from somewhere "out there," it comes from "somewhere around here." Let me explain. Those new early believers were not facing opposition from the Philistines, the Hittites, the Gibites, or any of those folks, You know who they're experiencing it from? The very people that lived in their subdivision. The very people who they've grown up with. The very people who they played ball with, who they worked alongside of. When Paul talks about the Jews, he's saying these are the people, listen to this, that I worshiped with at one point in my life, and yet they are the ones who are contrary. Understand today what that is speaking to us, what that is saying to us is the greatest opposition to biblical Christianity in your life is actually going to be somebody in your culture. It's going to be somebody who understands your world, who may have grown up around you, who may understand the concepts, the philosophies, the convictions, etc. It's not from somewhere way out there, our opposition is the very ground and the very culture that we find ourselves even in this very day.

Here's what's interesting, I want you to notice the strategy. What does it say in verse 16? "They forbid us to speak." You know, it's interesting today that what we know as biblical Christianity is so opposed, it is so disdained in our culture, but if you really peel away the layers, all they really want us to do is to keep our mouth shut about the person of Jesus Christ. You know, back in Acts 5 we have two incidences on both sides of that one respective chapter. We have these early believers who were out speaking in the name of Jesus. They're incarcerated. They get out. They're incarcerated again, and they get out again, but in both times that they are relieved of their incarceration, those who are in charge of doing so gave them very explicit instructions, "Do not speak the name of Jesus."

Now let me just state an observation and I'm going to ask forgiveness in advance. As I'm going through this observation, my spiritual gift of sarcasm may come out so forgive me. But think about why is our culture so mad at Christians? Now think about there are those that are hypocrites. I get it. There are Pharisees among us who make a bad name for us.

But can you think about what a biblical Christian's life really looks like? We're committed to truth, honesty, our family, our children, education, we go to work, we pay our debts, we give to those who are without. Stop me when it gets real bad, please. I mean, think about it. But all they want was to silence them. I want you to think about your culture today. When's the last time you saw our culture trying to shut down a Christian homeless shelter? When's the last time when disasters hit and the Baptists show up they say, "Oh, no Baptists coming to help with this hurricane." No. You see, they don't mind when we bring clothes. They don't mind when we bring food. They don't mind when we bring chainsaws and cut down the trees that are in the way. But don't say the name of Jesus. It's the same thing. They said, "Just don't use his name." Here's the problem: if you feed and you clothe and you disaster relief without the name of Jesus, then you've just given somebody a full meal and clean clothes on their way to hell. It doesn't help. We cannot but help. That's what Peter said but to say the name of Jesus.

So let's look at the source. Where does this come from? What originated this problem? What originates the problem in our world today? Look in verse 18, the Apostle Paul just calls it out. He says, "We tried but Satan hindered us." This strategy, this mentality, let me go ahead and tell you where it comes from, it comes from the very pit of hell is where it comes from. Now we're going to work through what that looks like when we talk about this source, so work with me a moment. If you were not with us the very first time that we began the study of 1 Thessalonians, I shared with you a very fascinating yet frightening statistic. Among people who claim to be Christians, remember we go back to that whole kinds of flavors and creeds and stuff, among people who would be willing to classify themselves as one who believes in "Christianity," over 40% of them do not believe that Satan is an actual real entity in this universe. And that frightens me to death because that means the enemy of humanity has half the people believing he doesn't exist. He is real, and even Paul calls him out and says, "You want to know what was behind all this? Satan was."

Now let me give you a few descriptors of who Satan is because I think sometimes our picture of him is in a red suit, horns and a tail. Let me begin by this: Satan is a very determined soul. 1 Peter 5:8, it says that he roams around like a lion seeking whom he may devour. Now let me put this in Southernese. Some of you guys have sat in a deer blind for days waiting for that one specific target. You know, the lion is the "king of the jungle," and yet they sleep on an average of 18 to 20 hours a day. Why? Because they are experts at waiting their prey out. Satan is so determined to destroy your life, he won't just wait a few hours or a couple of days, some of you can testify he'll wait decades and he will sit back. He is so determined, he will sit back and he will wait for just the perfect opportunity.

But here's the problem, he's not just determined, he's deceitful. 2 Corinthians 11:14, it says marvel not that Satan himself is transformed, listen to this, into an angel of light. Basically, what that means is this, that Satan's tactics and his temptations and the things that he's doing, he doesn't wear that red suit with the horns and the tail. In fact, what he does is he presents himself, listen, as humanity desires to be. Do you not remember in the garden of Eden everything that humanity was tempted with was positive. You'll be wiser,

smarter. It looks good. It'll taste good. Everything was on the positive and that's one of the things that we notice when Satan comes after us, he always cloaks himself, he always couches his story with this will make it better, this is good for you, this is beneficial for you. He is deceitful and hear me clearly, some of the best and, by the way, I can say this because I am one in the room, one of the best tactics that the enemy uses is a man in a suit speaking to a congregation in a church because you do realize that one degree off when it comes to eternity is 100% off for all of eternity. Who were those that were contrary most to Jesus? The religious guys, the Pharisees. Who were the most contrary to the early believers? Their countrymen and the Jews.

So what's his goal? Well, according to 1 Peter 5:8, it says he wants to devour. Jesus said in John 10:10, "The thief comes to steal, kill, and destroy and I've come that you might have life and life abundantly." What does that mean? That means the entities and the agents of the enemy and, by the way, can I go ahead and use a pretty popular concept but it's real? Basically the picture you have here is this, the source being Satan, he is the puppet master and he is moving the puppets within the culture. He's moving the puppets within our lives so as to distract so that eventually he can destroy and he can devour. You do understand that silence isn't the end game, destruction is. Silence is just the means to an end. Twenty years after the Lord Jesus Christ rose from the dead, it says here that they desired to silence them. It wasn't long down the historical road that they wouldn't stay silent and so more grave, literal means were employed. They had the same obstacles that we do today, their own culture telling them not to speak, the name of Jesus, and the puppet master Satan was behind it the whole way.

Let's get to some good news in light of all that. How about some opportunity? How about the opportunity for something in our lives that is beyond the opposition? Notice what it says in verse 19. It says for what is our hope, that's a good thing. What is our joy, I could take some of that, the crown of rejoicing. Are not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at his coming? Now there in verse 19, there is a word used in reference to believers that is only used five times in your New Testament. I want to get to the specifics of this. Essentially, if you allow me just to pull back for just a moment, you know, when we think about the Bible and we think about judgment, most of us typically think heaven versus hell and there's nothing wrong with thinking that but understand that's in Revelation 20 and if you're a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ today, you're not judged at that judgment. You've already been taken to be with the Lord. You've already received your new body. You're already good to "go." But can I share with you what the Bible says to believers? 2 Corinthians 5:10 says, "For we must all," this is to believers, "stand before the judgment seat of Christ to give an account of that which we've done in the flesh whether it be good or evil." Back in 1 Corinthians 3, beginning verse 10, it expands on that. It says, "There's no foundation whereby men must lay but the foundation which is Christ Jesus, for then we build upon this gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble, but the day will declare it by fire." By the way, you get to verse 15 and it says, "But yet so shall we be saved."

What does all that mean? It means that even if you come to a place in your life where you've confessed your sins and asked Jesus to save you, you are going to heaven, you are

seated in the heavenlies, it is a guarantee, but one day you will still face Jesus face to face and give an account of how you lived your life in light of what he did on your behalf. And the Bible speaks of several times this term "crown," this concept of rewards, this opportunity to present our lives to the one who gave his life for us in a manner that is honoring to him. What does it say here in 1 Thessalonians 2:19? You are a crown of rejoicing. Allow me very quickly to walk through some of these specifics of these "passages." What is it saying there? It's saying that one day there is a reward for those who exhort and edify the body of Christ and don't tear it down. You go back into 1 Corinthians 9, beginning verse 24, it talks about running this race and it says that when we resist temptation and when we live life as God has designed it, when we allow ourselves, our bodies to be beat into subjection, there is laid for us a crown of righteousness. Basically it's saying there that when the world offers you all the temptations that it does and you reject and you resist it and you do what God has called you to do, that one day when you stand before Jesus you have the opportunity to say, "I lived a holy life with the one that you gave and purchased for me." When you get into 1 Peter 5:4, it talks about that all of us have people around us that we can influence, that we can shepherd, that we can instruct in biblical concepts, and it says that when you've been faithful to do those things, there is a crown that is laid up for you. Get into James 1:12, it talks about trials and tribulations and sufferings and difficulties. It says for those who do not give in, they don't give out and they don't give up, there's laid up for you a crown of life. And then in 2 Timothy 4:8 it says for those who are more interested in his Second Coming than in preserving this mortal existence, there is laid up for him a crown.

Why is this important? Because every one of those aspects is an outflowing in the midst of the obstacles. What happens? We edify each other, not tear each other down. We live a life of holiness, not falling into temptation. We desire his return more than our continuance. We shepherd those that are around us. And when things get tough, we don't give up on him. What's the opportunity? The opportunity is that one day when we stand before Jesus, the one who lived, who died and rose from the grave, and we look at him eye to eye, we can say, "I did what I could with what you did on my behalf." Do you realize the opportunity? You will stand before the one who saved you and you can stand before him and say, "I am so grateful for what you did for me, I want you to see the life that I lived for you."

Can I show you some strategy? Turn to the book of Revelation 3. As you turn to Revelation 3, let me give you a little back story here. Chapters 2 and 3 of the book of Revelation contain a message to seven churches specifically beginning with Ephesus and ending with Laodicea. Of those seven churches, five of them receive a pretty strong rebuke about things that either currently are happening or about to happen. There are two of them that receive no rebuke at all, and this is important, this is critical because we're going to go to verse 11 of chapter 3. This is the church of Philadelphia. They are believing. They are doing. They are headed the right way. In today's context of today's passage, they are edifying the church, they are resisting temptation, they are educating those in the faith around them, they're not giving up when times get tough, and they're excited about Jesus to come back.

Notice what it says in verse 11 of chapter 3. These are the folks that are walking the straight and narrow, "Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast, that no man take thy crown." You say, "No man take your crown?" Do you know why people tear down the body instead of build it up? Do you know why people fall into temptation rather than living lives of holiness? Do you know why people give up rather than stay faithful to the things of God? I'll tell you why: because somebody talks them into it. Somebody, somewhere, on some type of platform says it's not worth it, quit. Somebody says why are you staying in, you need to get out. He says beware lest somebody, in other words, the strategy there, listen, is to not listen to those somebodies but to listen, remember back 1 Thessalonians 2:13? You receive the word of God as it was the word of God. The strategy is this: if anybody, and I don't care who they are, what their title is, if anybody tells you that your life ought to look different than what God's word says, you go silent to them and you open up your ears to the word of God. That's the strategy.

Let's talk about the source. Turn one more chapter to the right to chapter 4. Chapters 4 and 5 of the book of Revelation are not only the context for one of the songs that we sang this morning but it's also a very unique section of the book of Revelation. Most of the book of Revelation consists of judgments and chastisements on those who are rebellious to the things and the person of God. Most of the book of Revelation, if you've done any study at all, it's a very dire scenario except chapters 4 and 5. We are supernaturally transported into the throne room. This is the scene where they're crying, "Holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty." By the way, if I were to skip to chapter 5, this is the scene that scares every Baptist known to man. Verse 9 of chapter 5 says when you get there, you're going to sing a new song. I know some of you think you can't do that, but you're going to one day.

But I want to focus your attention on verse 10 and 11 of chapter 4. I want to talk about the source of these crowns, the source of this opportunity. This is critical. You must get this, "four and twenty elders fall down before him that sat on the throne, and worship him that liveth for ever and ever," listen, "and cast their crowns before the throne, saying, Thou art worthy, O Lord, to receive glory and honour and power: for thou hast created all things, and for thy pleasure they are and were created." The absolute worst thing you can do today is you can leave the message and say, "Boy, I'm gonna have a whole set of crowns when I get to heaven one day." I got news for you: if you live your life saying I'm going to do this and not do that so that someday God will give me a notch on my belt, you're going to show up one day and not have anything. Why? Because all these opportunities are not so we can parade them around the streets of gold. It's not so that one day when you're in your eternal mansion you can walk out, look at your name and go, "Ha, I got more than you do."

What happens? It says that one day when you get up there, you're going to take whatever crowns there are and you're going to lay them at his feet because you realize that you wouldn't have a life of distinction, you wouldn't have a life of resisting temptation, you could not edify others, you could not love others, and you could not endure if it were not for the one who is seated on that throne who gave of his life and sacrificed himself on your behalf. The opportunity isn't on this side, the opportunity is that one day, either

when he comes to get us or he takes us to be with him, whatever it may be, that you're able to lay before him and say, "God, I am so grateful for what you did on my behalf. I want you to see that I took everything you gave me and I lived it for you and I want to return it to you." We have the opportunity to give all that we are back to the one who gave all that he was so that we could even be there in the first place. Then, and only then when we get this, will we be willing to resist the opposition because of the opportunity that is before us.

Let's pray with our heads bowed and our eyes closed. Today, even though we spoke a lot about believers living a life honoring of the Lord to present back to him, maybe you're that individual here in person, maybe you're watching online, maybe you're listening on the radio and maybe today the Spirit of God took the word of God and made it very clear that your reckoning what the Lord isn't about opportunity, your reckoning is found at the end of the Bible, that decision of heaven versus hell. Maybe today you've never rendered that decision, maybe today you've never confessed your sins and asked Jesus to save you. Today can be the day where you have the opportunity not only to live your life for Jesus in the here and now, but with him forever in a place the Bible calls heaven. Speaking of the Bible, in Romans 10:13 it says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Notice it doesn't say whoever becomes a Baptist will be saved, or whoever stops this or starts that or passes this test. It says whoever calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. Maybe you're that person today that the Spirit of God is saying you need to cry out. You don't have to do it audibly. You don't have to say the same words or the same statements that I or somebody else might say, but maybe today this will serve as a guide, those of you who need to cry out, maybe this is your heart's cry. "God, today I come and I confess that what you already know about me, I have sinned. God, I've been places I've had no business being. God, you know I've done things I had no business doing. God, you know I've spoken words and had thoughts that were completely contrary to you. And God, I believe what your Bible says. It says the result of the wages of my sin is death. But it also says the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord. So today, God, I want you to know I believe. I believe I've got a sin problem that only Jesus can solve, but I also want you to know that I believe, I believe Jesus Christ loved me so much that he came on my behalf. God, I believe he loved me so much he lived a sinless life on my behalf. God, today I believe that when he was nailed to his cross, it was my sins that he was bearing the price and the punishment of it. God, today I believe that three days later when he rose from the grave, he actually made it possible for my sins to be forgiven and my soul to be saved. God, today I don't have the answers to all the problems of this world, the struggles of this world, the issues of this world but, God, I know what your Bible says about my sin problem that if I call out to you, you will forgive me and you will save me. So the best way I know how, I'm asking you to do just that in my life. In the best way I know how, I want to turn my life over to you."

With our heads still bowed and our eyes still closed, maybe you're that person today whether in person or online who cried out to the Lord. We want to invite you. In a moment I'm going to pray for us, we're going to stand and sing. I just want to invite you to step out and step forward. We've got a whole team set aside. We've got a room set aside. Much like that song we began the service with, according to Luke 15, whoever

calls on the name of the Lord the Bible says they are shouting in the heavens and the angels are rejoicing, and to be just quite honest, we don't want to miss out on the party today. We want to celebrate and we want the privilege of praying with and for you.

But before I pray for us, maybe today you say, "Well, pastor, I've already got that covered." Maybe your decision is following in believer's baptism. Maybe your decision is becoming a part of this incredible Bible-based fellowship of believers. Or maybe today it's not about stepping out and stepping forward, maybe today it's about leaving this place, going out into life outside of this specific property and realizing the opportunity that you have to live for Jesus even in spite of the opposition we face every single day.

Lord Jesus, as we come to this time of decision, thank you. God, you did not through your mercy and grace, you did not have to give us this opportunity to respond, Lord, you did not have to speak to us through your word today, you did not have to show us what our lives should be rather than what they are. So God, in that grace and mercy we say thank you, but more importantly would we be as the book of James says, not just hearers of your word but doers. It is in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.