

Study 3: The Word of Hope (Leader Version)

Introduction

Moving further into Paul's first letter to the Philippians, we begin to see more and more *how* the Thessalonians suffered and what that suffering actually entailed. What is often uncomfortable for Christians in America is how prevalent the theme of suffering is in favorable descriptions of the Christian faith. Rather than turning away from these themes, this week we're looking at how we can imitate the endurance of the Thessalonians through persecution.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13

[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.

Discussion

1. It is fitting that we begin today's study with what the Bible says about itself. Central to Paul's theology is his theology of the Word. While there are many places in Paul's work (2 Tim. 3:16) and other places in Scripture (Hebrews 1:1-2 and John 1) that speak about Scripture's nature and authority, there are specific details unique to this verse that help form our theology of Scripture. One of the main distinctions is that the Word of God is not man-made but God-made. **If Scripture were the "word of man," what would that mean for how we could treat it? Would it be authoritative? How does the fact that Scripture is the Word of God affect how we relate to it? How does that fact change how we live?**

Leader Notes: If the Bible were just the writings of men, we could safely ignore it. It would hold just as much value as any other book. It would not be authoritative, simply because we could say that our own musings about God and the world were equal to theirs! However, the fact that it is not the word of man but of God means rather than just reading and thinking upon it, we actually need to submit to it. It puts us under the orders of God! Because of that, rather than shaping Scripture to our liking, we have to shape our lives to Scripture.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

[14] 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] 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!

Discussion

1. In these three verses we see Paul's encouragement to those facing the enemies of the faith. We should not forget that Paul has a unique perspective on Jewish persecution of the Early Church, as he himself was a persecutor of the church before meeting Christ on the road to Damascus. So beginning with verse 14, let's observe Paul's encouragement to the Thessalonians. His first assertion is that the Thessalonians ought to take comfort that they are *imitators* in suffering. Anyone who has endured true suffering or persecution testifies that the most comforting thing is those who suffer alongside them, and here it is no exception. A sure worry facing the early church was that this suffering was not part of God's "plan." However, the news that other churches had suffered before the Thessalonians was surely comforting. **How do you think the Thessalonians received the news that their suffering is shared with other churches of Christ? In the spaces where we find ourselves suffering, how can we take comfort in the fact that others have walked that path before us?**

Leader Notes: Suffering is most painful when we face suffering alone. This becomes exaggerated when we believe that the suffering we are experiencing is "strange" or shouldn't be happening. We often become convinced that we are in the midst of pain because something in the lord's plan has gone awry. However, understanding that other churches and believers have also suffered in this way before us gives us the confidence of knowing that suffering is normal for Christians. We are not greater than our master Jesus who was persecuted, why would we be exempt from it?

2. It is fitting that we now address the new political problems that arose with the start of the early church. In most places, the Jewish religious rule had developed policies that allowed peaceful coexistence with the Roman Empire. This led to a couple different difficulties for the Early Church. First, because Romans had their own pagan religions, Roman authorities were suspicious of other, mysterious "cults" that developed within their vast empire. Second, because the Pharisees and Sadducees had such animosity towards Christians, their characterization of Christianity to the Romans portrayed the Early Church as a threat to Roman order. Paul says that, by doing this and making Gospel witness more difficult, the Jews "displease God and oppose the world."¹ However, the other comfort that Paul provided to the Thessalonians was that the Lord would enact justice. This theme rings through almost all of the Bible as God's people are

¹ Please note that this is not, in any way, a defense or justification of Antisemitism or racism. This text was written describing a specific historical period of ancient Jewish persecution against the Early Church. It is not at all an antisemitic condemnation or call to hatred or violence.

promised an eventual and final judgement where they will be vindicated and God's enemies will be destroyed. **How does the destruction of God's enemies provide hope for God's people? Do we take hope in that today?**

Leader Notes: For some this is a radically offensive thing to hear. To them, God is not a destroyer or avenger or judge; He is just a lover and a teacher. However, a study of nearly any book of the Bible shatters that reality. God is one who is coming to judge. He is a consuming fire (Heb. 12:29) who visits his enemies with earthquakes and whirlwinds and flames! (Isa. 29:6) But this is good news for us! First of all, it helps us to realize what we have escaped by our salvation. We are in the grace of this Almighty Judge, who passes a verdict of innocence upon those who are in Christ. Second, it gives us hope while we suffer under persecution and other ills of this world that God will demolish the sources of these woes. Nothing that harms his children will be able to stand. So whether it be an oppressive regime or the pangs of hunger and sickness, all ills will be removed when Christ comes again. We can wait patiently and hopefully for that day.

Closing/application

This section can bring up a lot of questions. How can we rejoice in the destruction of God's enemies? Is that relevant for us today? How do we endure suffering, and where can we look for those suffering alongside us? The great comfort we can take is that the word that we receive, full of hope and joy, is not an empty promise of man but God's divine word. We can trust Scripture and take confidence in its promises, including that eventually justice will be complete. In every corner of the new heavens and new earth there will be righteousness. Even if it might not be apparent at a glance, this text is full of hope for those suffering: Someday soon Christ will return and set things right.