

GODLINESS AMIDST PERSECUTION

1 THESSALONIANS 2:13–20



And we also thank God constantly...

In central Asian countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, new Christians are considered traitors both to native religious traditions and to their own families. Many new converts are isolated or beaten to “bring them back to their senses.” Yet remarkably, Christianity is growing here. What the Thessalonian church experienced from nonbelieving neighbors has been repeated worldwide for the past two thousand years. In fact, what the Thessalonians endured had already been experienced by the Judean churches, as Paul notes in our passage.

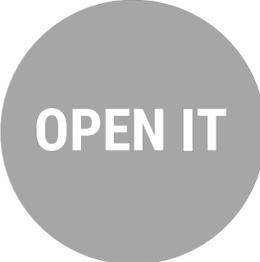
Paul likely linked the experiences of the Thessalonian church with Jewish believers in Judea to show these Gentile converts that those who received the gospel at the very beginning were also persecuted. In other words, the Thessalonians hadn’t done something wrong, rather persecution often went hand-in-hand with the gospel.

The mention of the Jews in today’s passage is troublesome for some who may think it suggests anti-Semitic sentiments on the part of Paul or the early church. Recall, however, that Paul, a Jew, never opposed the Jews as an entire group simply because they were Jewish, but only those Jews who rejected Jesus as the promised Messiah. Moreover, not all Jews opposed the gospel, as Paul’s own conversion makes clear. Also recall from our study on Acts (see September 2007), that Paul’s strategy was always to minister first in local synagogues until he was forced to leave, just as he had done in Thessalonica.

In addition to rejecting God’s Messiah, Jews who opposed the gospel made matters worse by seeking to prevent evangelism among Gentiles. As Bible scholar R. C. H. Lenski writes, “The worst feature of unbelief is not its own damnation, but its effort to frustrate the salvation of others.” This is the idea behind heaping up their sins and God’s wrath coming upon these Jews (v. 16). Yet Romans 9 through 11 teaches that Israel’s rejection of God’s plan leads to the gospel coming to the Gentiles and that God’s promises for Israel have not been voided in the process.

APPLY THE WORD

Today's passage focuses on God's unique purposes for Israel. It also offers encouragement in a more general way that persecutors of the gospel aren't outside the scope of God's sovereign purposes. The International Day of Prayer for the Persecuted Church began in 1996 and has grown to become one of the largest days of prayer. As Christians pray for their persecuted brothers and sisters, it's also important to pray for those who persecute. To learn more, you can visit www.persecutedchurch.org.¹



OPEN IT

1. When have you endured the greatest physical pain?



EXPLORE IT

READ 1 THESSALONIANS 2:13–20

2. What was Paul thankful for?

3. Who were the Thessalonians imitating?

4. What charge did Paul bring against the unbelieving Jews?

5. What hindered Paul from seeing his friends in Thessalonica?

¹ http://www.todayintheword.org/titw_devotion.aspx?id=133002



GET IT

“You received” (*paralambano*) means to receive from another, to receive alongside or to take to oneself. There are two basic ideas – to take or to receive.

- To take with one in order to carry away
- To receive something transmitted, as spiritual instruction or truth or a ministry
- To receive in the sense of an inheritance

The **arist tense** looks back to the time when the Thessalonians heard the missionaries proclaim the gospel and records their active response to that message – they took hold of the divine message. They received it alongside. They took it to themselves.

6. What is the difference between knowing God’s Word intellectually and knowing God’s Word internally?

“You accepted” (*dechomai*) means to accept with a deliberate and ready reception of what is offered, to receive kindly and so to take to oneself what is presented or brought by another. It means to welcome as a teacher, a friend, or a guest into one’s house. The word describes accepting persons with open arms, minds, and hearts, even going beyond normally expected gracious hospitality. The term was often used of welcoming honored guests and meeting their needs with special attention and kindness.

7. What is your typical response to the preaching and teaching of God’s Word? Boring? Exciting? Depends? In what ways are we to prepare our hearts every Sunday morning to receive and welcome the preached Word?

8. What things hinder us from welcoming the Word of God into our lives?

9. Paul makes it clear that the same gospel had changed both the preacher and the hearers in similar ways. What impact is made when you know that the preacher has been changed by the same gospel that they are now preaching to you?

10. Paul was filled with thanksgiving because the people had been changed by the gospel. In what ways have you seen your life changed since you first “received and accepted it”?

*Paul reminds his readers that they heard and received the message **from us**, the missionaries who first brought it to Thessalonica. But to guard against any possible misunderstanding of the nature of the message they received, Paul at once adds **of God**, emphatically placed immediately after **from us** as marking the clear distinction between **us** and **God** as the ultimate source of the message. Although brought by human messengers, in reality it was God's message...It is God's message; the missionaries were the medium. ²*

11. In what ways can we be sure that when we are listening to people preaching and teaching that they are truly speaking the “words of God” and not their own? (See also Acts 17:10–15.)

Paul says that the first things that happened at Thessalonica when some believed and accepted the Word of God was that they became targets of cruelty from their neighbors and townspeople. It seems from the passage that there was almost immediate ostracism from the community around them. Yet Paul is thankful; as one commentator says, the clearest evidence of the Thessalonians' acceptance of the gospel as the word of God was their willingness to suffer for it.³

12. What is it about Christianity that can cause people to respond so harshly to it?

13. How do we discern whether others are offended by the messenger or the message we proclaim?

*In 2:15–16, Paul pens two very controversial verses directed toward Jews. Although the purpose of these words is illustrative, these verses have caused some to insist that Paul is anti-Semitic. However, before arriving at a decision, read Paul's words for yourself: “[The unbelieving Jews who persecuted the churches in Judea] **who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men,***

² Hiebert, D. Edmond: 1 & 2 Thessalonians: BMH Book. 1996

³ Michael W. Holmes, 1 and 2 Thessalonians. NIV Application Commentary Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998

hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost.” Paul says that some first-century Jews were responsible for instigating the death of Jesus. Furthermore, the nation of Israel has a long history of rejecting the prophets God sent to them. Finally, it was the Jewish religious leaders in Thessalonica who instigated the riot that led to Paul, Silas, and Timothy being run out of town. It was also the Jewish religious leaders who resisted Paul’s efforts to share God’s good news about Jesus with the non-Jewish people. So in these verses Paul is not talking about all Jewish people of all time, or even all Jewish people of his time. This passage is a condemnation of some of the Jewish people of a particular time in a particular place, specifically the religious leaders who rejected Jesus and opposed the early church in the first century.⁴

14. Paul alludes to the judgment and wrath that await the enemies of God who are guilty of harassing and persecuting those whom God sends to spread the gospel. How does this truth affect your confidence when it comes to sharing the gospel even when it comes to hostile audiences?

15. How can we develop a faith that is able to welcome the gospel into our lives, fully knowing that our welcoming of the gospel may cause us trouble or persecution?

16. How does knowing that other believers today are enduring great persecution around the world help you to stand strong while experiencing minor harassment here at home?

17. How can the trials and hardships that we face as believers strengthen our hunger for fellowship with others?

18. How might the fellowship of the Thessalonians have been different as a result of their trials from the fellowship we experience today?

⁴ <https://bible.org/seriespage/tomorrow%E2%80%99s-world-1-thessalonians-213-20>

But Satan hindered us.

Paul wanted to visit his friends in Thessalonica. In verse 18, he shares a rather mysterious phrase – “but Satan hindered us.” There are several ways to understand this statement. One bible scholar helps us by giving four possible interpretations to this difficult part of the passage:

- 1. Some think it was continuing Jewish opposition, possibly even a plot.*
- 2. Some think it was because of Paul's thorn in the flesh and that this was a debilitating illness which he later called a “messenger of Satan.”*
- 3. Others ponder the possibility that a legal ban by the civic leaders of Thessalonica had been placed on Jason and his household (see Acts 19:9).*
- 4. Another possibility is that Paul was referring to a sin or scandal that detained him in Corinth and made it impossible to make the trip.*

The bottom line is that we are not sure what stopped Paul from making the trip. Paul, however, does attribute it to the work of Satan.⁵

19. Have you experienced Satan hindering you in your life? When did this happen? How did you respond? As you look back on this time in your life, do you now see how Christ used Satan to accomplish godly purposes?

When the Christians at Thessalonica read this letter, it must have encouraged them tremendously. They were going through intense persecution and suffering, and perhaps some of them were tempted to give up. “Don't give up!” Paul encouraged them. “Lay hold of the spiritual resources you have in Jesus Christ. You have the Word of God within you, the people of God around you, and the glory of God before you. There is no need to give up.”⁶

20. Have you ever considered that your involvement and service in church play a role in helping to encourage others to not give up?

21. What things can you do this week to encourage the believers around you to remain faithful to God no matter the trials they may face?

⁵ John R.W. Stott, *The Gospel and the End of Time: The Message of 1 and 2 Thessalonians* Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1991

⁶ Wiersbe, W: *Bible Exposition Commentary*. 1989. Victor