

1 Thessalonians 2:13–16

A Ministry in the Word

Scripture Reading

For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe. 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: 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: 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.

Receiving and Accepting the Word of God

The verse opens with thanksgiving, and the cause of that thanksgiving is the way in which the Thessalonians had received the word. Darby makes a distinction between two aspects: receiving the word, and then accepting it — properly appropriating it, taking it to themselves as what it truly is. And what they accepted it as was not the word of men but the word of God.

This has a broad bearing on everything we call Scripture. If what we have is the word of men, then one may receive it, accept as much as seems reasonable, set aside what does not seem applicable, and find some way around the parts that are uncomfortable. Men have many opinions, and many of them are wrong. But the Word of God is not to be handled that way. When statesmen and lawyers receive a document, they work on it — examining the breadth of the language, searching

for loopholes. But the Word of God is different: it is not for man to work on this document. It is the document that works on man. *Which effectually worketh also in you that believe.* The word *worketh* here is the root from which we get the word energy — there is a real, intrinsic power in the Word of God that operates in the soul.

In Hebrews 4, the Word of God is described as living and operative — quick and powerful. It is not a dead letter. It enters into the conscience, addresses the heart, and produces change. That power is not apart from faith: *it effectually worketh also in you that believe.* The hand of God gives faith as His gift into the soul, and that faith is the channel by which the living Word does its operative work.

Imitators in Suffering — the Bond of Persecution

The Thessalonians had become imitators of the assemblies of God in Judaea. The Jewish Christians in Judaea were being persecuted by their own countrymen — the Jews. And the Thessalonians, who were largely Gentiles, were being persecuted by their own countrymen — Gentiles. The form of the flesh differed; the spirit was the same. Whether it is Jewish flesh or Gentile flesh, the natural man hates Christ and hates the things of Christ. What unites them in their persecution is not race or nation but fallen human nature.

Who Both Killed the Lord Jesus and Their Own Prophets

Verse 15 lays a charge with apostolic faithfulness: *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.* The apostle does not adjust his language to what might be more politic. The record is what it is. Peter had charged them with the same thing: *whom ye slew and hanged on a tree.*

What is notable in the verse is the order: the Lord Jesus is named first, then their own prophets. One might suppose that the killing of the Lord Jesus would so dominate the sentence as to make the prophets a mere afterthought. But the Spirit of God does not forget the prophets. For whom did the prophets die? They had no part in dying for lost souls — that belongs to Christ alone. But God remembers what was done to those He sent with His word. The people killed the message-bearers as well as the Lord of the message.

There is a parallel to observe. The Lord Jesus brought them the word — they killed Him. The prophets brought them the word — they killed them. The apostles brought them the word — they persecuted them and drove them out. The Thessalonians heard the word and received it. What a contrast between these two responses to the one word of God.

Contrary to All Men — Spiritual Ishmaelites

The phrase *contrary to all men* — or against all men — is worth marking. It may be unique in the New Testament in its character. It recalls the word spoken of Ishmael in Genesis: *his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him*. The character being stamped upon these persecutors is that of spiritual Ishmaelites — the children of the bondwoman rather than of the free. While they are the physical seed of Abraham through Isaac and Jacob, their conduct aligns them with Ishmael rather than with Isaac.

In Galatians 6, the Israel of God is distinguished from those who merely bear that name outwardly. In Romans 2, the true Jew is one who is not only one outwardly but who is circumcised in heart. These who persecute and drive out are neither the Israel of God nor the true Jew. They are not part of what God promised to Abraham — that in his seed all the families of the earth would be blessed. That promise finds its fulfilment only in the Lord Jesus, not in ethnic descent alone.

Forbidding Us to Speak to the Gentiles

The specific charge that fills up their sins is this: *forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they might be saved*. What is the root of this opposition? It is not mere apathy toward the Gentiles. It is the implication of what that preaching carries. When Paul declares that God has sent him to the Gentiles, the unspoken implication is that the special exclusive position of the Jew before God is no longer what it was. If God is saving Gentiles freely by grace, then the inside track — salvation of the Jews — is not a matter of ethnic privilege. That is what their flesh cannot bear to hear.

Acts 22 illustrates this. Paul was heard until he said that God had sent him to the Gentiles. At that word they lifted up their voices and said, away with such a fellow from the earth. The implication was too much. It undermined their claim to a special standing before God based on descent. So their opposition to the gospel of free grace was at bottom a refusal of grace for themselves as well as for others. As verse 15 says: *they please not God*. And as Colossians 1:10 says, it is for us to walk worthy of the Lord *unto all well-pleasing*.

To Fill Up Their Sins — Wrath to the Uttermost

The phrase *to fill up their sins* reflects a recurring principle in Scripture. In Abraham's day, the iniquity of the Amorites was not yet full. God allows a fullness to develop before judgment falls. In the case of these persecutors, each act of rejection and violence — refusing the Lord, killing the prophets, persecuting the apostles, forbidding the Gentiles to hear the gospel — was filling the measure. The stoning of Stephen was a great turning point in the book of Acts: they had rejected the Lord when He came among them, and now they were rejecting the testimony that He was in the glory. There too, they filled up their sins.

For the wrath is come upon them to the uttermost. This is governmental wrath — the judicial hand of God upon His ancient people on account of their rejection of His word. This is distinct from the coming wrath of chapter 1, verse 10, from which the believers are delivered. That speaks of eternal judgment in a general sense. This is the specific governmental dealing of God with Israel as a nation.

The wrath to the uttermost had already begun to fall in Paul's day, but it was far from complete. What happened in AD 70 at the destruction of Jerusalem lay ahead. The great tribulation, the hour of Jacob's trouble, lies further ahead still. The Antichrist, the king of the north, the purging of all rebels in the judgments that precede the kingdom — these form a crescendo of governmental wrath preparatory to the introduction of the millennium. But in all of that there is this: He is able also to save to the uttermost those that come unto God by Him, seeing He ever liveth to make intercession for them (Hebrews 7:25). The wrath to the uttermost meets the Saviour who saves to the uttermost. And the purpose of God in sovereign grace will bring the nation through all of that to the day when all Israel shall be saved.

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