

1st THESSALONIANS BIBLE STUDY

1 Thessalonians 2:1-2

Lesson #3

Introduction

Last week we finished chapter one of this epistle, which highlighted the power of the gospel to affect the lives of those who believe it, and that all those who do have been rescued by Jesus Christ from the wrath to come. Now we'll move into chapter two and begin with the first two verses. I've titled this lesson:

Power, Conflicts and Persecutions

Verses 1-2:

1 For you yourselves know, brothers, that our visit with you was not without result. 2 On the contrary, after we had previously suffered and been outrageously treated in Philippi, as you know, we were emboldened by our God to speak the gospel of God to you in spite of great opposition 1 Thess 2:1-2 (HCSB)

Paul says, here in chapter 2, "for you yourselves know, brothers, that our visit with you was not without result." What does Paul mean by that? Actually this is kind of a follow-up to the things he said in chapter 1 regarding the power of the gospel to impact the lives of those who believe it. "Not without result" means that it did in fact produce a powerful change in the lives of those who believed it in Thessalonica. The power of the gospel was demonstrated by the effect that it had on those who believed it, **and** on those who didn't. Because then in verse two Paul references the treatment that he had received in Philippi, and the same treatment that the Thessalonians were now receiving from their own countrymen. And this too is proof of the power of the gospel. Because, if the gospel had, had no impact on the Thessalonians then there wouldn't have been any resistance to it. But the resistance proves that it did have an impact, and a substantial one, and a very visible one, which was the whole reason for the resistance, both in Philippi and now in Thessalonica, and everywhere else that Paul and the Apostles had preached it.

Any casual student of the Scripture cannot miss the fact that everywhere the gospel was preached in the Scriptures it was met with hostility and resistance by a good many of those who **did not** believe it. It wasn't that they just didn't care, it was that they absolutely despised it, because it shined the light of truth on their sinful behaviors that they loved and practiced. (Jn 3:19) Generally speaking, people don't get too upset if you simply disagree with their opinions, but if you tell them that their behaviors are sinful in the eyes of God, and will be met with His wrath, then they generally don't take this too well. And the more you tell them, the less they like it. And if you persist, then you can eventually, if not immediately, expect hostility and persecution will be their reaction.

Think about, in the New Testament times did the Jews vehemently resist those who worshiped pagan wooden idols? Now they did consider them unclean, and probably tried their best to avoid contact with them, but did they vehemently resist them and persecute them? If they did there's no record of it in the scriptures. But the religious Jews and the pagan idolaters joined hands together in persecuting those who believed the gospel of Jesus. Why? Because the pagan idols didn't call their followers to repentance and newness of life. The pagan idols didn't threaten the lustful lifestyles of the unbelievers. They could worship their idols, and the Jews could embrace their traditional religion, and both still live the lives that they wanted to live. But the New Testament Gospel affords no such freedom. It is a call to repentance, and a sanctified life. And it's for this reason that the New Testament Gospel has borne the brunt of persecution since the day John the Baptist began announcing Christ's coming, and calling for repentance of the people to prepare His way.

It was not meant to be otherwise. From the very beginning the gospel message has been a sword of division. It divides individuals, families, communities, cities, and even nations. The gospel was never intended to make darkness a friend to light, or to make sin a friend to righteousness, or to make Satan a friend to Christ. At this level the gospel is clearly intended to be a divider, not a uniter. And when it's preached truthfully, and faithfully, this is always what happens. It immediately begins to divide those who believe it from those who don't, and this division has always been a hostile one. Sin and righteousness were never intended to be good buddies, or even hospitable neighbors. The gospel calls for believers to completely forsake their former ways and former relationships. (Mat 10:34-39; Luk 14:26-33)

And this is what makes this whole contemporary seeker friendly, church growth movement so ludicrous. This whole movement is based on the idea that we can make unbelieving sinners our friends without calling them to repentance and sanctity of life. Where in the Scriptures is there even a hint that such a thing is possible? We mistake a heartfelt compassion for the salvation of sinners **through** repentance and faith, for the idea that we can befriend them without it. And then, maybe, somewhere down the road, they'll change their mind, if we can avoid offending them long enough.

But as we've just seen, that's not at all how the gospel works. If there ceases to be offense there can only be two reasons. One, that every single one in the town has believed it and repented, so there is no resistance. Or two, that the gospel you're preaching isn't sufficiently convicting to create an offense towards those who don't believe it. Is this what we want our churches to be, places that preach a gospel version that's not even capable of offending the unbelievers who hear it? Was this Paul's gospel to the Philippians, or the Thessalonians, or the Ephesians, or any other church?

Listen to me now, if the message preached in your church on Sunday morning doesn't elicit a response from the unbelieving community, then you probably haven't preached the biblical gospel of God. You've preached another gospel. If the lifestyle, and testimony, and behaviors, and ethics, and morals of your church don't prove to be an irritant to the unbelieving community, then you either live in an entirely Christian community, or your church isn't an example of any of the biblical models depicted anywhere in the scriptures.

If the whole community of unbelievers cheerfully accept your church, and offers no resistance to its teachings, and even attends some of the meetings, then there has to be a reason. And if this is the case in your church it's probably not a good thing, it's probably a warning to your church that its strayed from the truth, and therefore demonstrates no power to transform, or convict, or even irritate those who hear its message. That's not the goal, but it is the biblical example. Under no circumstances does a true evangelist enter a town for the express purpose of causing a ruckus and stirring up trouble, but he does know that faithfully preaching the gospel will most likely have that effect. The purpose is to spread the word of God's forgiveness of sin through His Son, Jesus to all who will hear, while knowing full well that trouble will almost certainly accompany that message. But, for the sake of those appointed unto salvation, it's worth the cost.

The first, and most obvious demonstration of the truth of the gospel, is in its visible separation of the believers from the unbelievers. This is the power of the gospel, the power to drive a dividing wedge between sin and righteousness that's impossible to ignore, and for this reason it cannot ever be friends with the world. It is predestined by its very nature to stir up a ruckus and demand a decision on the part of everyone who hears it. You must either embrace it, or you must reject it, but you cannot ignore it. Neither can you reject it and still remain friends with it, or receive it and still remain friends with the world. The gospel demands a decision, believe it and demonstrated it in your lifestyle, or reject it so that you can continue with your lustful behaviors. No straddling or fence walking is accepted among true believers. (2Co 7:1)

This is the New Testament Gospel, and this is the New Testament church displayed in Scriptures, but alas, this shows very little resemblance to the Western churches of the 20th and 21st centuries. We now think the gospel is a call to prosperity in the present age, and an assurance of a happy and fulfilled life in the here and now. This is anything but the call of the gospel in the Scriptures. Both the gospel call, and the church examples in the Scriptures, are diametrically opposed to almost everything we now teach and embrace. We've reversed good and evil, even in the churches.

There's no end to the preachers who promise unbelievers a happy and fulfilled life, free from sickness, despair, adversity, and failures. But every example in the Scriptures is just the opposite. Now it's certainly true that this is the ultimate and eventual result of belief, in the coming kingdom of God, but it certainly isn't the immediate result. The immediate result is persecution, separation, discrimination, and hostility from unbelievers towards all of those who visibly demonstrate the power of the gospel acting on their lives and behaviors.

Certainly all things do work together for good for those who love God and believe the gospel. The brutal crucifixion of Jesus Christ on the cross worked out for the eventual good of both Christ and his followers. But is there anybody who fails to recognize the intense agony that He went through first, here on this earth, during that ordeal, so that He could accomplish for us the ultimate coming reality of all those precious promises of God, in that final kingdom to come.

Before the rejoicing came the agony, and before the glory came the cross, and this is the biblical example of every one who wishes to be a follower of Jesus Christ. Now I wish to express my personal gratitude to God for not calling all of us to this intense level of persecution, at least not as yet, but every believer will meet some level of resistance and rejection by the unbelieving world, of this we have been assured. (Jn 15:18)

The more like Jesus we are, the more intense the world will dislike us, and conversely, the less like Jesus we are, the less the world will dislike us. In fact, if we can become sufficiently non-Christlike, then we can probably maintain a kind of dubious friendship with the world. But is it worth it? What exactly does this accomplish? This might make our lives a little easier, but what will it do for the furtherance of the truth of the gospel? What purpose does a powerless testimony serve in the furtherance of the gospel, or even more significant, in the intended visible demonstration of the power and glory of God through His Son, Jesus Christ? (Salt of the earth. Light of the world.) (Mat 5:13,14)

Concerning such churches as these, Christ said they were loveless and dead, and if they didn't repent He himself would come and take their lampstand away. (Rev Ch 2 & 3) Certainly the long-range prognosis for the church is glorious and profitable, but before that time arrives, Jesus told us that discipleship would be extremely costly in the short term. Let me read His own words as recorded for us in Matthew chapter 16:

24 Then Jesus said to His disciples, "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross and follow Me. 25 "For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it; but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 "For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul? 27 "For the Son of Man is going to come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and will then repay every man according to his deeds
Matt 16:24-27 (NASB)

Now I have to ask, after reading these words of Jesus to his disciples, just how in the world do we justify the vast majority of practices, and the lop-sided gospel that our churches are presenting today? We give an altar call at the end of a sermon that didn't even approach the biblical gospel. It had nothing to do with sin, repentance, faith, or pending judgment, but still a call to come forward and make a decision for Christ has become the traditional and expected conclusion to every sermon in our denomination, regardless of the content of the message. And heaven forbid we should deviate from that tradition. If this is so that's fine with me, but then may I humbly suggest that every sermon that we preach should deal with the subjects of sin, and judgement, and repentance somewhere within the content of the sermon.

Jesus Christ came to earth, lived a perfect and sinless life, and died on a cross for just one specific reason. And that reason wasn't in any way related to our earthly welfare. In fact it's almost contrary to it. The gospel of Jesus Christ is related entirely and solely to the subject of sin. Man's sin, for which he is condemned to perish in a lake of fire forevermore. The gospel is not good news about our financial situation, or our marital situation, or our health situation, or our prosperity or happiness or self-esteem. Its not about any of these. It's good news regarding our sinfulness and the repercussions of it. To present the gospel as anything else whatsoever is to distort and pervert and defile it. But the sad fact is that today's gospel is viewed as a universal cure-all for whatever ails us, and a universal happiness pill for our otherwise useless and meaningless and unfulfilled lives. "Come to Jesus, He'll fix everything" is the popular gospel today. Then when He doesn't deliver on that bogus promise, they leave in disgust and angry contempt, concluding that the whole Jesus thing is just another sham. They came in for the wrong reason, so they leave with the wrong conclusion. Actually it's the right conclusion if you came in for the benefits alone because for such as these Jesus has nothing to offer.

Rarely do I ever even hear a gospel presentation that's about sin and punishment, about confession and repentance and obedience to God. But still every sermon is concluded with an altar call to come to Jesus. The problem is, come to Jesus for what? Is it to come to Jesus for forgiveness of sin and strength for repentance in total self-denial. To willingly surrender our lives into total subjection to the will of Christ. To figuratively crucify all of our own hopes and desires and expectations, and follow after Jesus in complete self-denial. Is this what we're being called to do? I think not. In fact, I think I could easily count on one hand how many times I've heard that sermon preached in 30 years as a Christian. This gospel is offensive, it's anything but friendly to the sinner, and absolutely nobody in their right mind, as the natural man would see it, would ever respond to this gospel. And that's exactly as it was intended to be in the plan of God.

The gospel wasn't meant to attract the frivolous and halfhearted. It's a call to put one's own self-interests in the background and become subservient to the interests of another. This isn't something anybody's going to do of their own natural choice. To be able to do this requires something that doesn't even reside in man, in his natural and fallen state. To be able to do this requires a very particular gift directly from God. The Scriptures call this a rebirth, that happens through faith that's a gift of God. And just as no man has ever initiated his own fleshly birth through an act of his own will, neither has any man ever initiated his own rebirth solely by an act of his own will, but received it as a gift of God. And it's this gift that makes every man who receives it a willing participant, not just a reluctant subordinate.

God has the ability to make His creatures to do what He wants them to do completely willingly. Any king who is powerful enough and ruthless enough can get his subjects to do his bidding, but only God can make them all do it willingly. Both the good and the evil doers each willingly and freely choose to play the part they've been assigned by the sovereign and omnipotent God of creation. No one has ever been saved who wishes that he hadn't been, and conversely, no one who is among the lost has ever earnestly desired in their heart to repent of their sins and follow God in righteousness obedience. If they had they would be among the chosen, because He turns away none who come to Him in faith. (Jn 6:37)

Now someone might say to me, Bob, the Bible talks about people weeping and gnashing their teeth in apparent agony over the thought of being sentenced to eternal hell. Aren't these people truly sorry for their sins? And then again in Matthew chapter 7, versus 21 through 23, the Lord speaks of those church members who cry Lord, Lord but are told by the Lord that He hasn't ever known them? Aren't these people sorry? The answer is, yes, of course they're sorry, but the necessary question is, what are they sorry for?

The Lord said to those in Matthew chapter 7, who were apparently regular churchgoers, that He hadn't known them because they continued to practice lawlessness, which is the biblical term for sin. Oh yes, they wanted to go to heaven, and they certainly didn't want to go to hell, but neither were they willing to repent of their sins. They aren't sorry for having committed all those sins, they're only sorry that they have to pay the penalty for doing so. If the Lord told them all that they didn't have to pay for their sins, then none of them would be the least bit sorry they had committed them. This is that group who claim that salvation is nothing more than a divine reprieve, a presidential pardon for crimes committed, and requires absolutely no subsequent behavioral or attitude modifications.

But the scriptures repeatedly declare otherwise. You see, genuine saving faith includes within it a whole new heart attitude, and a whole new way of thinking. In fact, that's exactly what it is. Those who've received this gift of a new heart and a transformed mind have a whole new attitude towards sin. They find it repugnant and shameful, and are very much grieved over it, because it offends our Lord and Savior who redeemed us. These don't have to be caught to be sorry. And their sorrow isn't so much for the punishment, but for the crime itself. And likewise, not so much for the damage it does to us, but for the offense that it commits towards God. This is something no unbelieving, unregenerated person could understand except from a completely abstract viewpoint. It's purely theoretical to the unregenerate heart.

This was pretty much what Jesus was telling the Pharisee when He told him that unless he was born again he couldn't see the kingdom of God. This was an educated Jewish teacher who had to be very well versed in the scriptures to hold the position that he had, but Jesus said he could neither see nor enter the kingdom of God without a rebirth event. He was certainly able to comprehend certain theoretical principles, but he wouldn't be able to properly interpret them, or especially, partake of them experientially, without this rebirth of his dead human spirit. To other people he looked like a true scholar and a certain candidate for heaven, after all, he talked the part, and he dressed the part, and he surely kept all the traditions, but to Jesus he was just another dead man walking. And evangelical Christianity is also full of these. They can talk the talk, and put on the show, but inside it's all abstract principles and learned human traditions.

Godly sorrow over sin produces repentance even without receiving punishment. (2Cor 7:9-10) And this distinction goes to the very heart of what salvation is in its nature and effect. Salvation is far more than simply a divine pardon, it's a rebirth unto a whole new heart attitude, style of life, and way of thinking. The true gospel, when heard and believed, produces nothing less than this reaction in all who believe it. And again this is what Paul meant when he said earlier that his gospel came in power, the power to visibly and radically change the lives of all those who truly believe it.

Acts chapter 14, verse 22, records Paul's words of encouragement to the churches when he tells them that it is "through many tribulations that we must enter the kingdom of God." If you remember, Paul made this statement very shortly after having been stoned nearly to death in the city of Lystra I believe. Now I've had my gospel presentations rejected, but to the best of my knowledge no one's ever tried to kill me for it. At least not successfully. But that's exactly what they tried to do to Paul at Lystra and to Jesus himself in his hometown of Nazareth. I guess their messages just weren't sufficiently seeker friendly. But then they didn't have the modern techniques that we have today, right? Or, on the other hand, could it just possibly be that those seekers weren't genuinely seeking the truth but rather confirmation of their own righteousness, and when they didn't get it they responded violently?

I perceive that the content of the message being presented in the first two verses of chapter 2 is Paul's acknowledgment that the true gospel begets true believers, and true believers naturally beget opposition. And let me add that this is not an accident or an unfortunate mishap. It isn't Satan thwarting and frustrating God's plan of redemption and sanctification of His chosen, but rather it's the working out of the eternal and divine, predetermined, and fully intended plan of God. Just like Christ's rejection, persecution, and eventual crucifixion was no surprise to God, but fully part of His plan, in like manner, rejection and persecution are part of God's plan for all of his chosen children. To try to make it otherwise is to find yourself striving against the plan of God.

The purpose of the gospel is not to befriend the world, **it's to convict the world of sin**, and call it to repentance through faith in Jesus Christ. Faithfully doing this will inevitably bring both the joy that comes from seeing sinners repent, and unavoidably, the agony of persecution from those who refuse to believe it. This is the way the Father designed it to work, and trying to modify it to remove the offense is quite literally striving against God. Consequently, fabricating or substituting a non-offensive version of the gospel may temporarily fill up a building with bodies, but it will never produce the genuine fruit of the Spirit that characterizes the true gospel. Which fruit is a changed and sanctified life of obedience to the Word of God, wrought from a regenerated heart and a transformed mind. And for this reason all substitute gospels are doomed to eventual failure. Because, first, they can't produce the unity of the Spirit necessary to hold them together, and secondly they will fail to deliver on whatever else it was that was promised to them to get a response.

The true gospel begets a willing and joyful obedience in the believers that's empowered by the Spirit of God working in their hearts and minds. We cannot remove the offense unless we also remove the gospel, because it's the gospel itself that is the offense to all who reject it. But, it's the power of God for salvation, and sanctification, and joy, and contentment, to all those who believe it, both then, and now, and forevermore. And furthermore, it endures, regardless of resistance, persecutions, trials, tribulations, hardships or any other earthly difficulties that must be dealt with, by the sovereign plan of God, in our preparation to be His family and His worshipers eternally.

Conclusion:

From these two verses we can reasonably draw some conclusions as to their intended teaching.

1. When the gospel is preached fully and accurately, as it was intended, it will always produce a visible and powerful result in the lives of those who truly believe it. And this is a by-product, if I may use that phrase, of the work of the Spirit in those who believe it. By that I mean that it isn't so much just an optional choice, but a necessary result. Jesus said that **every** good tree produces good fruit. By this statement He meant that every true believer, not just some, shows the result of belief by their actions and thoughts. And if anyone doesn't show this result they are declared false and cast into the fire, as recorded in John chapter 15; and, there's many more of these than there are who are genuine, as described in Matthew chapter seven, verses 13 and 14, and again in verses 21 to 23.

2. If the gospel is preached as it was intended it will usually incite opposition, and probably result in some degree of persecution. But this verse isn't telling us to intentionally go into groups and organizations and places that oppose the gospel and enter into argument with those who oppose. But rather to preach the gospel to those who have an ear to hear it even if there is opposition.

In our present time we often hear accounts about professing Christians who go to homosexual rallies, abortion clinics, or risque night clubs for the purpose of confronting those people with the gospel. These people justify their actions by the naive and sleepy headed notion that this is what Jesus did when he received these kinds of people who came out to hear Him. What they fail to realize is that He didn't go to them in those places, **they came out of those places to hear him**, and yes, when they did this He graciously received them all. And certainly so should we.

I've sat in churches and heard people boasts about having confronted such groups and declaring that they've done their job according to the Scriptures. What they fail to realize is they're applying the wrong Scriptures, the Scriptures that apply to these applications are Matthew 7 verse 6, which tell us quite clearly **not** to take what is precious and valuable, like pearls, and throw it into a pig pen, and not to give that which is holy to dogs. Just as you wouldn't hang a beautiful pearl necklace on a pig, or present a beautiful leather covered Bible to a dog, neither are you to present the gospel to those who you know will only mock and defile it. But again, to make certain that we understand, anyone who **comes out** of these things, and wishes to hear the gospel, is more than welcome to hear it. Jesus came into this world to call sinners to repentance, and every kind of sinner is welcome to hear the call and response to it. The evangelist is told to go out into the world, but his call to the sinner is to come out of their world of sins.

3. The gospel isn't a universal cure-all for human ailments, it's a very specific cure for a very specific ailment. Just as aspirin isn't prescribed as a treatment for lung cancer, and chemotherapy isn't prescribed as a treatment for headaches, neither is the gospel a universal prescription for all of mankind's earthly ailments. But I'm sad to say that this is what it's become in the vast majority of churches. A preacher will give a sermon on anger management and give an alter call to come to Jesus. Another preacher will give a sermon on marriage, and give an alter call to come to Jesus. Another preacher will give a sermon on financial management, and give an alter call to come to Jesus. Another preacher will give a sermon on healing of sickness, and give an alter call to come to Jesus.

Let me state for the record in plain straightforward language that Jesus nowhere has said that believing in him will cure any of these ailments just described. Yes, the Bible describes many things that Jesus did cure, and many miracles that he performed, but he never in any way implied that the purpose of his incarnation was to do anything except bring sinners to repentance and faith, resulting in forgiveness for their sins and the gift of eternal life. The miracles that Jesus did was to substantiate the authenticity of his claim to be able to forgive sins and bestow eternal life.

Why would anyone believe that this man could do either one of these things unless he did something to demonstrate his power and ability to do so. And that was the whole purpose of the miracles. But to stay on point, the New Testament Gospel nowhere makes any promises, or even lends any credibility to the notion, that faith in Jesus Christ will result in anything on this earth other than the likelihood of persecution. The gospel of Jesus Christ is a message that deals with one single and specific ailment of humanity, **and that is his sin**. For this ailment, and this ailment alone, it is a guaranteed, 100% certain cure, in every case, but it's designed for absolutely nothing else. For any preacher, or evangelist, to imply that responding to the gospel may be a cure for anything other than sin, is like a medical doctor implying that aspirin might cure lung cancer. It is an outright lie, and is doomed to heartbreak and catastrophic failure.

The most that can be said on this subject is that once sin has been dealt with in one's life, through repentance and faith, there are both resultant benefits and resultant difficulties. But, one comes to Jesus for absolutely no other purpose in mind, nor objective in view, **but** to deal with their sin and God's righteous judgment. If your coming to Jesus was just a means to accomplish some other end, then you were not under the conviction of the Holy Spirit, and you've simply wasted your time. All evidence suggests that 80% or more of the membership of nearly every church in this country has gotten there through the pursuit of something other than what the gospel affords, and the churches do this knowingly, and are even proud of it. So, failure of the respondents to show the fruits of regeneration has come to be the expected norm.

So, to sum this up, the gospel will be met with varying degrees of resistance and persecution, as God has intended, but in spite of this it will produce a visible and powerful result in the lives and attitudes of everyone who believes it. And for these, this is the power of the word of God, and is the only substantiation we need to sustain us through any and every difficulty that may befall us, until we arrive in the presence of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ the Lord.