

God's Word is a Sword

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[0 : 00] Well, we've been in this letter, 1 Thessalonians, a few weeks now, and I wonder if you feel like you're getting to know this church. So much of what they're going through, most of us have never experienced, but the questions and doubts and worries that they face are questions and doubts and worries that we share.

And tonight we'll see that again, persecution on a scale that most of us could barely imagine, but a question that we can all relate to.

It's a question in two parts. Firstly, is it normal to face opposition because of the gospel? And if it is, then why?

Why? Is it normal for the gospel to face opposition? I think our first instinct up here, at least, is to say, yes, it is.

Of course it is. We've read Acts, and we know the suffering of the very first Christians. We know, too, that the broad brush strokes of history, how the gospel has only very rarely been popular in any given time or place.

[1 : 17] We look around the world today, and we see that in many, many places, Christianity is anathema to those in the halls of power or those in the same streets.

And so we can see that it's normal for Christians to suffer because of the gospel, but why is that normal? Is there a reason?

Is it just coincidence? If we could think of maybe a wall covered in scraps of newspaper clippings and photographs, there's all the evidence that we could point to of opposition to God's word to show that it's normal in history and in the world.

But is there anything connecting it all together? Where is our string that ties this news article to that photograph? Or this church in Thessalonica with churches in the world today?

Does it all connect up? Or is it really just pure coincidence, a thousand bits of paper that all happen to tell the same story? Is it normal to face opposition for the gospel?

[2 : 32] And if it is, why? And I don't think we're asking, are we out of curiosity? Paul doesn't write this letter just because he felt like saying something to the church.

I think our answers to those questions could one day, if not now, be the difference between us standing or falling in the faith. Paul writes these verses to help the church not to lose heart because of what they're going through.

And so our answers to those questions, they are intensely practical, aren't they? The difference between carrying on and giving in in the face of opposition. And now to answer those questions, Paul starts with where the gospel comes from.

Firstly, he says, the word is divine. The word is divine. Or as he put it last time in verse 9, the gospel is the gospel of God.

And just see what he says there in verse 13. We also thank God continually because when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is the word of God, which is indeed at work in you who believe.

- [3 : 56] It's an incredible thing to think, isn't it? That as the church heard Paul speaking and preaching, what they were hearing was the very word of God.
- Human words in a known human language, but not from a human origin. Not merely a human word, but the very word of God.
- We thought last time about a few ways that we know that the gospel isn't a human invention, something someone's made up. But tonight, Paul invites us just to dwell on that truth and take it in.
- One writer, Angus MacLeod, puts it like this. Through the preaching of the gospel, people are able to hear directly from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ through the working of the Holy Spirit.
- Do you ever ask, who is it when you come in on a Sunday? Who is it that you come to listen to? Whose voice do you hear? You hear the words of the triune God.
- [5 : 08] He goes on, if God's word is being handled faithfully, it means we are hearing God's voice. Have you ever wondered, most of us do in the Christian life, how do I know that God is speaking to me?
- How can I hear his voice? What does God sound like? Well, Paul says, God sounds like what it sounds like when a normal person reads from the Bible and communicates what it says.
- And Paul and the others are so thankful to God continually or constantly, he says, because when these guys heard them doing that in the synagogue or in their houses, explaining and proving from the scriptures that the Messiah had to suffer and rise from the dead, they accepted it, they accepted it, not as what Paul thought or what Silas reckoned, but as what God has said.
- Sometimes you hear occasionally, sometimes even from church-going people, maybe in different contexts than ours, people say things like, well, that's your interpretation.
- Or you have kind of a more traditional view, don't you? Well, what they're really saying, if you unpack it, is that what you're saying is a human word.
- [6 : 32] At best, it's your interpretation of God's word, but don't go thinking that you've got God's word itself. You, in the end, can we really know what God thinks?
- Who has God's words? The twist is that that person, though they won't say it, is secretly saying, God kind of agrees with me and not you, right?
- But brothers and sisters, if we have heard and we've received the gospel once for all time delivered to the saints, then we can say openly and shamelessly, this is the word of God.
- Not our interpretation, our understanding of it, but there it is in black and white. Whatever we think about it, however we struggle with it, however it challenges us or our society or our world, that is what God says about who he is and who we are and who his son is and what he's done for us.
- And we can be so, so thankful, as Paul was, when we or anyone comes to recognize that, to hear his voice in the human communication of the gospel.
- [7 : 52] When someone comes to see that what we read in the Bible, the teaching of the church, what is preached from the front or what's taught in our life groups or shared over a coffee in a one-to-one Bible study, that isn't simply what that church believes or what that Christian thinks, but it is what God has said.
- You want to be thankful for that? Today, you want to be thankful for that this morning? Brendan came to be baptized and declared his trust in the good news of what Jesus has done to save him.

And that was not simply because that is what Joe had said to him or what Shoros had shared with him or what Anne had taught him, but because that is what God had said to him in his word.

What a precious thing that is. And we should give thanks to that, not just when it happens at the start in somebody's conversion. But Paul says we thank God continually.

It's something never, ever to take for granted, is it, in a church like ours that is so used to having the Bible opened. It is a battle.

[9 : 03] Let me tell you, it is a battle every week for me and Donald to say no more and no less than what is right in front of us because we are not here to tell you what we think.

Right? Who cares what we think? You don't come to church to hear that. You come to church to hear the word of God. And you urge us on in that and spur us on in that and thank you for that and pray for us in that.

And pray for yourselves, pray for each other in that, too, that whenever you hear the Bible being opened and read or spoken from faithfully, you would treat it not as human opinion or good advice, but as what it really is, says Paul, the living word of God, sharper than a two-edged sword that cuts to the heart.

Let us always, always give thanks for that as long as that is true of us, of our church, because thankfulness to God for the gift of his word, it boosts our immune system.

Giving thanks to God for his word, it protects our hearts when things turn nasty because of the gospel. And so we need to give it its proper value, hold it in its proper place, listen to it in a right heart.

[10 : 28] We need to count God's word more precious than gold because secondly, Paul says, that same word divides.

The divine word divides. See, the danger is, if we were to work back from the impact of the gospel in the world, the divisions that it creates, the opposition it brings, then we might conclude, mightn't we, that perhaps the gospel isn't so precious after all.

Is it really God's word if it divides people? But just look at verse 14. Paul points out that that is one of the very reasons he's so thankful for this church, for you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus.

You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews. The four there is linking back, isn't it, to verse 13.

He's saying one of the reasons he knows that they accepted the gospel as God's word is that they're going through what the very first churches in Judea went through too.

[11 : 42] Their experience mirrors the experience of God's churches everywhere so that what the Christians of Thessalonica are getting from their neighbors is the same as what the Christians in Judea got from their neighbors.

Now, Paul could be kind of connecting dots randomly, couldn't he? Thessalonica and Judea are hundreds of miles apart. What do they have in common?

But then he connects some dots that shows us that there is a bigger picture because their suffering in Thessalonica not only mirrors the experience of the churches but also, verse 15, also the experience of the Lord Jesus, the prophets, and the apostles.

So that in fact, what the Thessalonians are suffering from their neighbors is the same as what Jesus and all his people, past and present, suffered from theirs.

So he's saying, look, it's not a coincidence that you happen to be suffering in the same way. He's saying, you are replicating the experience of everyone who's ever belonged to Christ, Christ himself.

[13 : 04] You've all given this a go, haven't we, successfully or otherwise? If you skim a stone over a lake or a river, it leaves a trail of ripples, doesn't it, whenever it bounces off the surface of the water.

And if you're good at it, you might even lose sight of the stone as it vanishes into the distance. But you can still see where it's gone because of the trail of ripples it's left as it has impacted the surface.

And in a similar way, Paul's saying, he can tell where the gospel has landed because it makes the same impact wherever it goes. The kingdoms of Israel and Judah where the prophets spoke, the city where Jesus taught, the towns and villages where the apostles went, the cities of the world where churches were planted.

He can see where the gospel's been because of the impact that it's left. And that impact, he says, is division and hostility.

Now, as a side note, notice that he's not blaming anything on the Jews, that he's not also blaming on the Gentiles.

[14 : 20] So yes, the Jews were hostile to the gospel. They took it out, he says, on the Messiah, his prophets, his apostles and his churches, but your own people also rejected the gospel and have made you as a church suffer in the same ways, he said.

So we should just be careful, shouldn't we, that we should not take his really strong words in verse 15 as an anti-Semitic statement. I mean, it would be senseless, wouldn't it, because Paul himself was ethnically Jewish.

He's not singling out the Jews. His very point is that it doesn't come down to one single place or one single people group. Rather, he says, this is the impact in every place.

And among every people group, when the gospel has ever gone there, it's divided the world and it's brought suffering on the church all the way back to where it started.

So back to our two-part question, is it normal for the gospel to bring hostility? It is. It's normal. And as strange as this sounds, that truth is supposed to comfort this new church.

[15 : 38] It would be a little bit, I thought, like if you hadn't gone for a run for a while and you went out one morning, you thought, right, time to get back into this. And you went out running and you got sweaty and breathless and your muscles hurt.

You might feel a bit dizzy. Sit down. You need a drink. And you might think, this clearly isn't working. There's something wrong here. This isn't for me.

I feel sick. My heart's bursting out of my chest. I'm clearly not built for this. I'm not going running anymore. I give up. But then a more seasoned runner comes past and sees you and has mercy on you and says, no, no, it's normal to get sweaty and out of breath when you go for a run.

Your muscles should hurt. You will need to drink water. That's what happens when you go running. So don't give up. What you're going through is normal.

Now, you would still feel sore and be out of breath and maybe a bit sick, but wouldn't it change everything to know that that's normal when you go running? That it's not that it doesn't work for you or you're doing it wrong, but running brings pain for everyone who goes running and you can carry on running even though it hurts.

[17 : 00] Well, friends, in the same way that no one has ever gone running without getting sore from it, no one has ever been a Christian without suffering for it. And that's hard for us to take in as we sit here tonight.

But understand that if you're not getting a hard time for the gospel, that is not normal. Even if that's been true our whole lives or most of our lives, that makes you an anomaly as a Christian.

See, the danger of that for us is that when you start getting a hard time from someone or when we start feeling more pressure, perhaps from our society or from the state, we think, well, this can't be right.

There's something going wrong. God can't possibly expect me to keep running with the gospel under this kind of pressure because we think that suffering is the exception when really the exception is comfort.

and privacy and getting to live a quiet life. I have not come to bring peace to earth, said Jesus, but a sword.

[18 : 19] Brothers and sisters, we don't go looking for trouble, but normally, normally, we don't have to. If we find that the gospel doesn't ever turn people away from us or provoke a negative reaction, the chances are we're not actually sharing the whole gospel.

But part two of our question, why is that normal? Well, where do all the strings lead back on our wall of newspaper clippings and photographs?

Paul says the Thessalonians became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus. See, in verse 15, who does Paul put at the beginning, first in line?

That list is not in chronological order, is it? Do you see that? He puts the Lord Jesus first in line for suffering and somehow following on from him the prophets of the Old Testament and the apostles of the New Testament, because they, like the churches of Judea, were in Christ Jesus.

Why does it come? Why is it normal? What connects it all up? Well, opposition is normal, brothers and sisters, because we are united spiritually to a despised and rejected Savior.

[19 : 45] And part of why Paul is so thankful to God is because the Thessalonian suffering for the gospel proves that they, too, are in Christ Jesus.

united to a crucified Christ by faith, because wherever it lands, the word of God divides.

But Paul doesn't spare us in the last verses of this section because his last point is that in response to the gospel, the world often doubles down.

the world doubles down. Now, these are the tricky verses of this pit. He is not holding back in verses 15 and 16. What does he say?

They displease God and are hostile to everyone in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way, they always heap up their sins to the limit.

[20 : 49] The wrath of God has come upon them at last. Now, it's really important, like we've spotted before, to know who he's speaking about and who he's not speaking about here.

These are really strong words. He is not speaking about that person at your work who does not believe in God. He is not speaking about your friend who isn't that interested in the gospel.

He is not speaking about you if you're here and you're interested in Christianity or you want to become a Christian but you've not yet taken that step. There is a line there that you need to cross.

There is a division. You need to take that step. You're either in Christ or you're not, but Paul isn't saying you are as bad as you possibly could be.

He's using these really strong words to speak about people who deliberately try to stop the gospel being shared. He uses the word effort, those who put an effort into keeping us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved.

[22 : 00] The gospel does bring division in our country, in our workplaces, in our schools, sometimes, sadly, in our homes. But it doesn't need to be like this, does it?

You know, we would love for everyone in our families or on our course, all of our friends, our whole team at work to put their trust in Christ, but none of us want those people to be forced or coerced into it, right?

And in the same way, lots of people tolerate us as Christians and churches and let us speak about our faith even if they don't believe it themselves. But some people do want us to stop speaking the gospel and will try different ways of preventing us from doing that.

So, at the personal level, this is your neighbor who says, everyone has a right to their own beliefs. I respect your beliefs. If you respect my beliefs, you'll just not speak about this Christian stuff.

Don't talk about that with me. As if you were being intolerant or disrespectful simply in wanting to invite your neighbors to church, that you shouldn't even bring it up.

[23 : 20] Or at community level, that can happen. The first time I actually heard any preaching series through First Thessalonians was from a church in 2016 that had tried to buy a building in their town.

Only one man in that town raked back through the sermons that had been preached online and took a few quotes out of context and essentially created a smear campaign and created enough opposition locally for the council to refuse that church the right to buy their building.

Now, the council refused because of local opposition, but the local opposition was to the church's clear teaching of the Bible. They didn't want a church that spread that message owning a prominent building in their town.

Or at a national level, the free church right now is responding to a bill coming through Holyrood which would ban what they call conversion therapy. Now, it would ban things that no decent person would ever agree with or countenance.

The ways that people who are attracted to people of the same sex have been treated have been awful and outrageous. But it would also ban not only those overtly evil treatments, but also any teaching that didn't affirm somebody in their sexual desire.

[24 : 49] So that something as simple as praying for somebody, struggling with their sexuality, or pointing them to Christ and his costly call to discipleship would not only be looked down upon but be illegal.

Now, most of the architects of that bill probably don't have stopped the spread of the gospel at the top of their priority list. But one of the, I think, deliberate consequences of that legislation would be to stop the church from pressing home the full implications of the gospel for all of our life.

What they want people to get is a watered-down, compromised gospel, not the full gospel of God. Now, those are three examples of what Paul's talking about.

If we took a survey of the church around the world, I'm sure we could find many more examples and much worse examples of that. But there are people who will deliberately try to stop the spread of the gospel.

And Paul says four things about those people. Firstly, no surprise that they displease God. He says in Romans 8, before we put our trust in Christ, we cannot please God.

[26 : 08] Everything we do displeases him. But he also secondly says that these people are hostile to everyone. And that, I think, does give us something to think about because sometimes we speak as if the whole world were holding a gun pointing at the church.

But Paul says the people holding the gun are those trying to prevent the spread of the gospel, and it's actually pointing at the rest of the world. They are hostile to everyone because they keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved.

Now, doesn't that change the lay of the land for us? It's not us against a world that hates the gospel, but us for a world that is being held hostage by a few who hate the gospel.

I was listening recently to a podcast. I know some of you listen to also, The Rest is History. They have a series right now on the Nazis in power. And the guys on the podcast said, when the German army reoccupied the Rhineland, it's on the border with France, their force was so small that if the French army had responded, the German army would in no way have been able to hold their ground.

But France didn't respond at all because the Germans had recruited policemen to dress up as soldiers to make their army look much bigger than it really was. If only France had had the boldness to step in, they said, how it could have changed the course of the next ten years.

[27 : 54] brothers and sisters, we can think we're up against a much bigger opposition than we really are because we mistake everyone for someone who hates the gospel when really, says Paul, there's a much smaller group who genuinely want to stop the gospel holding everyone else to ransom.

Now, doesn't that change the playing field that we have been convinced, I think, that it is us against the world when really, it is them against the world that we want to see saved.

Doesn't that embolden us in our witness? Which is why he says thirdly about them that in this way they always heap up their sins to the limits.

Now, not because they do the things we normally think of as the worst possible sins, but because the opponents of the gospel commit the great sin. of stopping people having their sins forgiven.

In the gospels, it's amazing how gentle and patient and compassionate and merciful the Lord Jesus is with people who have done all sorts of things, people who have sinned in all kinds of ways, but he spares no mercy for people who stand in the way of sinners coming to him.

[29 : 22] Woe to you, he says, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites, you shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces. You yourselves do not enter and you will not let those enter who are trying to.

And so, says Jesus, says Paul, the wrath of God has come upon them at last. It's what the word woe means, it's a curse upon them.

Paul is saying that same curse of God's anger has come, present tense, right now, on those who shut people out of the kingdom of heaven today and stand in the way of sinners coming to the Lord Jesus.

And so, it is an incredibly stark and serious warning to anyone who wants to stop people hearing about Jesus. And as I say, I don't expect that there are many or any people here tonight in that position.

But if there are, or if you would in the future, or if anyone happens to be listening to this online, you need to know that God's pure and holy anger burns most fiercely against those who wish to stop the spread and the sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ and stand in the way of people coming to him.

[30 : 54] And you need to take that warning and stop and turn to the one that you've stood against, and he will forgive you. The amazing thing is that this letter was written by somebody who had done exactly that.

The apostle Paul had persecuted the church fiercely, dragged people to prison, stood over a man being stoned to death for his faith, but he turned to the Lord Jesus, and he was saved.

And you need to do that, because God's wrath is against you, and it anticipates an unspeakable punishment that will come at the end of the age with the return of the Lord Jesus himself.

But the point really comes to us as Christians, that even when the world doubles down on its opposition to the gospel, and even when those dividing lines become very, very clear and very stark, and even when we are under pressure to just stop speaking, and just stop sharing, God has got it all in hand.

While you are suffering and being censored, says Paul, he is full of righteous anger, and his gospel will not be silenced.

[32 : 26] Friends, God's word is a sword, it divides the world, it provokes a heated response, that's to be expected, that's normal, but it also cuts to the division of soul and spirit, the division of joints and marrow, it is at work in those who believe, and those who will come to believe, through our long-suffering witness, and the encouragement is that that is to be expected too.

It's no coincidence that when the gospel came to the church in Thessalonica, it was at work in them, and they accepted it not as a human word or a made-up story, but as the word of God, as the gospel that would save them, and God's word does that in his world, even when we are right up against it.

So take heart, when you feel the heat and the gospel is opposed or you are put down for your witness, don't give in, don't stop, keep going, because when the world doubles down on its opposition, the Lord continues to be at work through his word so that we and others come to believe the good news of the Lord Jesus Christ that is able to save our souls for eternity.

Let's pray that we would know that encouragement and that boldness together now. Let's pray. okay.