

When Opportunity Knocks

(1 Thessaloninas 2:13-16)

2/27/19; Wed PM Pine Grove

Introduction

In 1979, Microsoft was a small computer company relocating to the state of Washington.

The CEO of the company was a man named Bill Gates and they were needed some investors to grow the company.

One such possible investor was a man named Ross Perot...

Perot had amazed a small fortune by 1979 by selling computer systems to government agencies in the 60s and 70s.

However, he was still looking in the technology world for the next great company.

So in 1979, Perot invited Bill Gates into his office to see if this small company named Microsoft would be a worthy investment.

Once in the office, Perot offered to buy the company for \$40 million dollars, but Gates did not want to sell..

Instead, he offered Perot a substantial share of the company for close to \$10 million.

However, Perot declined the offer and the two went separate ways.

Needless to say, Microsoft's value skyrocketed over the next 3 decades, and today the company is worth over 800 billion dollars...

Now, Perot didn't do too bad.

He is still alive and worth 4 billion himself, but he said that the day he let Bill Gates walk out of his office without a deal was the worst business decision of his life...

According to Perot, life changing opportunities only come around once or twice in a lifetime, and sadly he missed out on the greatest opportunity he's ever had as a businessman.

When we think of the Thessalonian church, we think of a church that was the result of incredible opportunity..

Here was a church set in a city of incredibly evil city and culture of a sea port town ..

Here were people in that church that had most likely grown up Jewish synagogues..

Yet, when God sent Paul to the synagogue in Thessalonica, some of those there took advantage of the incredible opportunity that came their way..

They not only believed Paul's message that Jesus was the Messiah and Savior of the world, they left their lives behind and formed a church right there in the middle of the city.

These are people that recognized opportunity and took advantage of it and gained a heavenly reward..

With that in mind, we come to verses 13-16 of 1 Thessalonians 2...

And though Paul has used the first part of this chapter to defend himself from people seeking to discredit him before the Thessalonians, he now turns his attention back to encouraging the this church..

And so let's read these 4 verses that will be at the center of tonight's message...

13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.

14 For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, 15 who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and [q]drove us out. [r]They are not pleasing to God, [s]but hostile to all men, 16 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 [t]to the utmost.

Tonight, I want us to consider the do's and don'ts of gospel opportunity...

In other words, how do people respond both positively and negatively to the gospel opportunity that God puts before them...

We will begin with the proper response in verses 13 and 14..

Let's call this..

I. A People on the Right Path (13-14)

As we arrive at verse 13, Paul is again back to where he started this letter to the Thessalonians, and that is giving thanks to God for them..

In verse 2 of chapter 1, Paul writes..

2 We give thanks to God always for all of you

And now in verse 13 of chapter 2, he uses almost the exact same phrase..

13 For this reason we also constantly thank God

Clearly, Paul is encouraged by the church at Thessalonica..

And why is he so thankful?

Because he probably never thought they would make it..

He preached for 3 weeks to these people, and he probably spent a little more time there, but he was still run out of town earlier than he would have liked..

And for that reason, he was fearful that this church wouldn't make it..

But when Paul sent Timothy back to them, they had made it..

And they had not only made it, they had done very well as a church..

So Paul is so thankful to God for His work in their hearts..

And how did God work in the hearts of the Thessalonians?

Well, look at the second half of verse 13..

13 For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God,

How is it possible for a group of Thessalonian Jews and Gentiles to be saved by the preaching of a man they had never met?

Simple, God changed their heart to receive Paul's words as His words..

In other words, people who rightly respond to gospel preaching understand that that message is from God.

The miracle of salvation results in people hearing the words of a man but knowing that those words are actually the words of God..

That is exactly what happened in Thesalonica..

Paul walked into the synagogue and asked to speak to the crowd assembled there..

That would be quite common.

In fact, Jewish rabbis and teachers travelled from synagogue to synagogue...

So the people in the Thessalonian synagogue settled for what they thought would be another message from another traveling Jewish rabbi..

But when Paul stood up, some in the assembly knew that Paul was speaking the word of God...

And it wasn't a matter of how Paul spoke or how he looked, it was simply a matter of God changing their hearts to receive His teaching as the word of God..

This is the testimony of my life..

I was in and out of churches my whole life as a young boy in the south..

I heard all sorts of sermons but it wasn't until I sat across the desk from a pastor in his study that God gave me the ability to accept that pastor's words as God's word to me..

On top of that, I had read the Bible and even memorized verses as child, but it wasn't until God changed my heart to read the Bible and understand that my life was changed by it...

This is the miracle of salvation..

People who ignored the word of God pay attention to it.

People who didn't care about the Bible begin to care about it.

People who rejected the Bible come to accept it..

And look, people who take advantage of gospel opportunity are those those who receive the words of man as the word of God..

But not only do they receive it and believe it, they obey it..

Look at the end of verse 13...

which also performs its work in you who believe.

The incredible truth of being exposed to the word of God is that it has an effect on anyone who listens and receives it.

Yes, it convicts and motivates but it also transforms.

How else can we explain a group of Jews with no background in Christianity doing so well as a church?

The only way to explain that is to understand that the Word of God has a supernatural nature to it.

As the Thessalonians believed the word of God given to them by the preaching of Paul, their lives were changed by it.

This is your testimony tonight if you are a believer.

The word of God has done a work in you, and it works in all who truly receive and believe it.

People who are on the right path receive the word of God, believe the word of God, and are constantly being changed by it..

These are people that make the most of the gospel opportunity that God puts before them..

But it isn't all good news for those folks..

Verse 14..

14 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

As Paul recounts how well the Thessalonians had received the word of God and acted upon it, he also recalls the price they paid for their actions..

In their case, they had much in common with all believers...

They were persecuted for being on the right path..

Paul writes in verse 14..

You became imitators of Christ, and then you suffered at the hands of your own people because of it.

This is the pattern of Christian living.

To know Christ is to know suffering.

Now to be clear, persecution is rarely physical.

It often comes to believers in more subtle forms..

Your parents can't believe that you raise your children that way.

Your friends can't believe that you don't watch those kind of movies and TV shows anymore.

Your coworkers can't understand why you talk the way you do.

And all of that adds up to suffering.

The Thessalonian believers were most likely ostracized because they left the synagogue there to form a church.

They probably lost jobs and friends and most likely family.

And Paul is clear...

This is exactly what happened in churches in and around Judea.

To come to Christ.

To come out of Judaism and call yourself a Christian was unthinkable, yet many believers left their Jewish roots because they believed the gospel as the word of God.

In some ways, we can't relate.

To go to church in the south is expected.

Your parents most likely urged you to come to Christ.

But it isn't that way for many believers around the world throughout history..

However, I will say this.

If you are truly saved, you have truly suffered for Christ.

People who don't think that being a believer brings suffering probably aren't saved themselves..

To know Christ in a real way is to invite difficulties into your life...

This is preachers who write books entitled "Your Best Life Now" ignore verses like 1 Thessalonians 2:14 which clearly teach that believers often suffer for their faith.

The Thessalonians were not living Their Best Life Now, but they were living in light of a better life to come...

Bottom line is this..

Those who take advantage of gospel opportunities receive and believe and obey the Word of God, but they also suffer for it..

The Thessalonian church was an example of that, yet God continued to bless them and protect them...

Now let's move from a people on the right path to..

II. A People Awaiting Wrath (15-16)

In verse 15, Paul goes from admiration to aggravation in one word...

And that word is “the Jews...”

As Paul commends the Thessalonians for taking advantage of gospel opportunities, he now shifts to a group of people who missed out on gospel opportunities...

And that is Paul’s own people, -the Jews.

Now when Paul uses the phrase “the Jews,” he isn’t referring to every Jewish person.

In fact, many, if not all, of the Thessalonian believers are Jewish..

Paul Himself is Jewish.

So the phrase the Jews is often a reference to the religious leaders of the Jews, who killed Christ and then tried to kill His followers..

And just the mention of that group of people sends Paul into a frenzy in verse 15...

And he begins to describe them in this way..

the Jews 15 who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out.

Listen to me...

In a very real senses those who take advantage of gospel opportunities receive the word of God...

While those who waste gospel opportunities reject the word of God...

And where do we see that in verse 15?

Well, Jesus clearly spoke the word of God, and the Jews killed Him...

The prophets also spoke the word of God in OT, and the Jews also killed them..

And in Paul's day, he and the disciples spoke the word of God and they were constantly under attack.

This is the pattern of people who waste gospel opportunities.

They attack the word of God and those who speak it.

There is no "live and let live" mentality is gospel rejectors.

They reject the word of God and the people who deliver it, even to the point of death..

If you study church history, the men who courageously taught the word of God and lived the word of God often became martyrs for the faith.

To speak the word of God has often meant to risk your life for the sake of Christ.

Now the great irony of what the Jews did is this.

They were given the word of God.

They possessed the OT, yet when the One whom the OT points to came, they killed Him.

Jesus is the focus of OT prophecy.

God promised Adam and Eve a serpent crusher.

God told Abraham that his family tree would bring a blessing to the whole world.

God told David that the Ultimate King would come from his line.

And then the prophets spoke of this coming King and Savior..

But when that one predicted in the OT showed up, the Jews rejected his words and ultimately killed him.

Talk about wasted opportunity...

Your whole life you wait for a Savior, but when he comes, you call him a devil and send him to a cross..

This is the legacy of the Jews of Jesus' day...

They killed the One they needed the most..

Same is true today.

People walk in churches and the answer to the biggest problem they have which is the problem of unforgiven sin..

And not only do they refuse to believe it, they refuse to come back to hear more.

This is spiting in the face of God's grace.

To reject your only hope is to put yourself in the worst place possible..

Yet, many people waste gospel opportunities every day.

We can't help but think about Judas.

Walked, talked, listened to Christ for over 3 years,
yet betrayed for a bag of silver coins.

Can you imagine having the opportunity to sit beside Jesus and have him explain the Bible to you?

Can you imagine having a front row seat to the his
compassionate healings and powerful miracles?

Then can you imagine rejecting all of that for a bag
of money?

Look, there will be people that have in churches
hearing gospel preaching for decades that will
spend an eternity in hell..

How sad and tragic is the reality of missed gospel
opportunities, yet many have wasted these chances
in their lives..

But not only do rejectors of the gospel kill the mes-
sengers of the gospel, they also seek to stop the
spread of the gospel...

Look at the end of verse 15 and the start of verse
16..

***They displease God and are hostile to everyone
16 in their effort to keep us from speaking to the
Gentiles so that they may be saved.***

WE see something here that we have seen in the gospel of John and that is hostility to the truth..

The Jews were hostile to anyone who tried to carry the gospel to the world..

One of the great ironies of the Bible is that the nation that God saved in the OT became a barrier to God saving people in the NT..

The Jews became a hindrance to the work of God in the NT.

Obviously, God saved whom HE desired to save, but the Jews did all they could to prevent the gospel from going forward.

The book of Acts is filled with example after example of Jewish leadership trying to stop the apostles and Paul from preaching the truth..

How sad is it when the supposed people of God hinder the work of God in the world..

Clearly, God isn't pleased..

Which leads to the end of verses 16..

In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.[b]

Paul simply writes that God's displeasure with those who waste gospel opportunity leads to His wrath being poured out on them.

And that is exactly what God did to the Jews..

In 70 AD, the Romans would come in and destroy the temple..

Jews would be scattered all over the world as a result of this attack..

But that is not the ultimate end to those who waste gospel opportunity..

There will also be a future 7 year tribulation period for those alive who have wasted their gospel opportunity in this age..

Followed by a 2nd coming of Christ to wipe out those who waste gospel opportunity in those 7 years...

And finally, there will be a great white throne judgment that leads to an eternal lake of fire for all who have ever wasted the chance to be saved...

There will be Jews in that eternal wrath, but there will also be Gentiles in that lake of fire..

To waste gospel opportunity is not like wasting a chance to eat a steak...

To waste the grace that God gave you in bringing the gospel to you is to sentence yourself to an eternity of torture...

There are Jews in hell today because they wasted the greatest opportunity imaginable..

The rejected and then killed their King and Savior..

But equally sad, there are Gentiles in hell today because they wasted the same opportunity to come to Christ.

Conclusion

So how do these verses help us tonight?

#1 - The Word of God is central.

If anybody ever accuses me of focusing too much on the Bible in the lives of believers, they will be exactly accurate in their accusation..

I cannot stress what a steady diet of the word of God will do in your life.

The Thessalonians only had the word of God given to them by Paul.

But they received it, believed it, and it changed their lives.

If ever want to know the secret of revival in a person or a church or a nation, it is a return to the Word of God...

We credit Luther for the reformation, but Luther said that all he did was turn the word of God loose and it did all the work.

If you are struggling spiritually, don't look for some emotional experience..

Don't look for mystical force.

Sink yourself into the word of God and be renewed..

#2 - The people of God are targeted.

To know Christ is to suffer with Him, and I would tell you this..

True believers will pay a price for following Christ..

If your life is always smooth sailing, check to make sure that Jesus is truly driving the boat.

I understand that life is abundant with Christ, but there are also times of attack.

The Thessalonians proved that their faith was real because they suffered and stayed with Christ..

If you never find trouble, it may be a sign that you never found Christ..

#3 - The wrath of God is deserved.

The only people in heaven will be those who saw gospel opportunity and acted in repentance and faith in Christ alone.

While hell will be full of people who wasted the gospel opportunity that came their way.

I want to end with one of Jesus' parables..

Turn to Matthew 21:33..

33 "Listen to another parable: There was a landowner who planted a vineyard. He put a wall around it, dug a winepress in it and built a watch-tower. Then he rented the vineyard to some farmers and moved to another place. 34 When the harvest time approached, he sent his servants to the tenants to collect his fruit.

35 "The tenants seized his servants; they beat one, killed another, and stoned a third. 36 Then he sent other servants to them, more than the first time, and the tenants treated them the same way. 37 Last of all, he sent his son to them. 'They will respect my son,' he said.

38 "But when the tenants saw the son, they said to each other, 'This is the heir. Come, let's kill him and take his inheritance.' 39 So they took him and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him.

40 "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those tenants?"

41 "He will bring those wretches to a wretched end," they replied, "and he will rent the vineyard to other tenants, who will give him his share of the crop at harvest time."

42 Jesus said to them, "Have you never read in the Scriptures:

"The stone the builders rejected

*has become the cornerstone;
 the Lord has done this,
 and it is marvelous in our eyes'[h]?
 43 "Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God
 will be taken away from you and given to a people
 who will produce its fruit. 44 Anyone who falls on
 this stone will be broken to pieces; anyone on
 whom it falls will be crushed." [i]
 45 When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard
 Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about
 them.*

In a sense, the Jews understood that if Jesus was truly the Messiah, then they deserved whatever wrath God would send..

And the reality is that Jesus was the Messiah and now they and all who reject him deserve the same fate.

Many people have problems with God's wrath and teach all sorts of error trying to do away with it.

I want to be clear.

If Christ is who He says he is, then all who reject get exactly what they deserve..

The wrath of God is deserved on all who waste God's gracious opportunities.

Don't let that be true in your life.

Let us pray.