

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good evening, St. Silas. It's a pleasure to come and look at God's word of you this evening. Apologies on behalf of my physical health. I'm a bit nasally this evening, so bear with me.

For those of you who don't know me, I work with the Christian unions at Stratford and Cali universities in the center of town, so I'm a kind of surrogate West Ender.

And it's my pleasure to come tonight to preach from this passage of Thessalonians. I spent a lot of time in this in the last week and a half, and I've been really enjoying getting to grips with it, so I hope that you can enjoy it too.

I hope as you've been listening to Darren preach through this for the last couple of weeks, you've got a real sense of what a joy the book of Thessalonians is.

How much of an encouragement this church is to Paul as he writes, and what an encouragement that church was to the churches in the surrounding area and even further. And I hope that as we look at it this evening, we get a sense of that encouragement ourselves.

[1 : 1 3] To start off with, though, I want you to think about times when you're really thankful for someone holding a clear and firm conviction about something.

Sometimes the clear lines that people hold, the firm convictions that they stick to, have a huge impact not only on their lives, but on the lives of the people around them. Take, for instance, a couple of historical examples.

Maybe we think of Emily Pankhurst and the other women in the suffrage movement who won women the right to vote because of their clear convictions of that necessary equality.

Or maybe we think of William Wilberforce and the abolitionists who, with their clear conviction of the evils of the slave trade, had a profound impact in history and ended up liberating thousands and thousands of slaves in the long run.

Without the effort of these people, these examples would not have happened. Both of these examples, however, came at huge cost to the people who bore those convictions.

[2 : 2 4] The reason they were able to have such an impact was that they held these positions when they were deeply unpopular and they held them with great courage.

And now we can look back with deep thankfulness for their suffering for the sake of those messages. But I wonder what comes to mind when I say, who are the Christians that you know whose clear convictions encourage you?

Maybe it's those who encouraged you when you were younger. Maybe SU camp leaders or Sunday school leaders that encouraged you when you started to learn the truth about God.

Maybe it's people in Christian history who have stood against the tide of culture, standing firm for the gospel. Maybe it's Christian missionaries or Christian workers today who you know, whose hard work encourages you to stand firm in your beliefs.

I wonder, though, if there are people out there away from our church who would pick us out as an example. Are we a church of people that other Christians can look to to gain encouragement because of the clear convictions that we hold under pressure?

[3 : 42] Now what we find throughout Paul's entire letter to the Thessalonians is that this church is great encouragement not just to him, but also to many of our churches because of their firmly held convictions in the face of immense pressure to change their minds and just give up.

And I hope that by looking at tonight's passage we can be emboldened in our convictions on the truth of God's word and equipped to stand strong against an opposing culture with a sure sense of God's justice for those who stand firm in belief in him.

Now, if you were to go back to Acts and read about when Paul visited Thessalonica, you would see that he was met with great resistance from the Jewish people there.

And yet his ministry had an incredible impact. And as Paul reflects on his time with the Thessalonians through this letter, he has many, many reasons to give thanks for them.

In chapter one, we found that their hard work and endurance flowing out of their hope and faith in Jesus led to the gospel spreading very far and very fast.

[4 : 58] Because of the depths of their convictions and the clarity of their repentance, Paul was able to say that the gospel rang out across the whole of Macedonia and Achaia, which is a very large area if you look on a map.

But it actually went even further than that. So what is it about this church that's made it such an encouragement, such an example to take notice of? Well, what we find Paul commending them for again and again is their deep conviction that when Paul brought the message of Jesus to them, they didn't just think this was Paul's message, just some teaching from a man, but actually the gospel of the Lord Jesus himself.

In this passage, we find that it says, Paul says they accepted it not as a human word, but as what it actually is, the words of God.

So the first point I want to say then is, do we have the same clear conviction as the Thessalonian church? Do we believe that what we have in scripture, in the truth of the gospel, and in the whole Bible, is the word of God and not just the word of man?

And by that I mean, when you read the Bible for yourself, or maybe with your children, when you attend roots or growth groups, when you hear the word preached on a Sunday, are you listening as if it has the authority of Jesus?

[6 : 29] Are you treating this as Jesus' words through people, or just the word of man? Now you might immediately think, well, you seem far too big for your boots to say that you're standing there speaking with the authority of God.

But hold on to that thought for a moment. I certainly don't want to stand here claiming that I personally have any special authority when I speak. But that's the point. The authority here is not in the person speaking, but in the word of God that is being preached.

The way we react and respond to the Bible's teaching then is incredibly important. An older minister that I know used to say this. He said that the Bible must be up here, above our heads, not down here, below us.

The Bible holds authority over me, not I over it. And actually that's hugely important, because that means I cannot set myself up as an authority over the word of God.

What you have there in your hands, in the words of scripture, is the word of God, not the word of man. And I want to ask, is that clear conviction held by the Thessalonian church something that we ourselves share?

[7 : 43] Now I think a good test of this, if you're maybe not sure, is how do you react when you find yourself disagreeing with the words of the Bible? When its instruction is hard to take, or when it just seems to be demanding of something of me that I don't want, how do I react?

Well, if our honest answer is just to say, well, actually I just ignore it, or to say, well, things were different then, and actually now, it's not that relevant. Or even to say, well, that's just that person's opinion, it's not important for me.

Well, then we find ourselves treating the Bible as just the words of man, not the words of God. We're effectively saying that I'm not listening to Jesus speak, I'm just listening to someone talk.

And if that's the case, then we just can't claim to have the same convictions as this church did. We're still treating the Bible as if it's a deniable human word, not Jesus speaking to us today.

Now, that isn't to say that to be a faithful Christian, you must be perfectly comfortable with every idea that you meet in the Bible. I don't think there is any Christian anywhere who's never had a doubt, or never struggles with what the Bible says.

[9 : 03] But when faced with those situations, even if we don't like what the Bible teaches, we must affirm that it is correct, and that its ideas are correct when ours are not.

That its ideas are more important than ours. And we bow to God's authority in his truths and in the commandments that he sets down for us by listening to it and choosing to live by it.

Two things I want you to think of there are that you need to be careful how you listen to the Bible, but also careful how you respond to God's word.

How can we be sure of that, though? How can we be sure that this word is the word of God and not the word of man? Well, if you look down at the end of verse 13, the proof for Paul is that this word is at work in you who believe.

Whose word could change the hearts of man and convince people to change their lives, live differently, and live sacrificially to give up their own way of thinking and of living?

[10 : 09] Is it man's word that does that or God's word? I would say that real Christian growth, real Christian living, and real Christian maturity could only come from the true and living word of God.

If we want to grow and want to change, if we want to become more like the Jesus that knows us and loves us, then we must come under the authority of God's word.

For some of us, this will require a time of reflection on actually what the Bible is. For some of you here, this might be the first time that you've come across the Bible, and therefore, you actually need to grapple with this idea that Christians believe this is not a human word, but something given to us from God.

But for all of us, on some level, we need repentance for those times when actually we do reject in our hearts the words of God, when actually we do know that we don't always react well, and we need to look to God's authority and turn away from our own way of thinking.

Now, I guess that first point shows us something of the challenge of holding clear convictions on something that might pose a challenge to our society.

[11 : 26] Now, something to encourage you, though, is that that is couched in a very warm letter. Paul looks back to this church with joy continually, and actually, they never stop being an encouragement to him.

this church is a great example of people who've held that conviction of the authority of the word of God firmly. And Paul says that that rang out over all the country from their church.

They've become an example that people can look to to receive encouragement and to stay strong in their convictions. However, having and maintaining convictions under pressure are two different things.

The second point I want to make is if you look down at this passage, when under pressure, maintaining these convictions gives us unity with other churches.

If you look down at verse 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.

[12 : 35] Paul says that the convictions of the Thessalonians that have held firm under pressure have made them imitators of another church. Now the church in Judea, being in the very Jewish heartland, was under constant pressure from Jewish opponents.

That, however, has not stopped that church in standing firm. Paul's able to say that they are in Christ, that they've stood their ground and endured. And that actually enables the Thessalonians to stay strong and endure as well.

The Thessalonians must be so encouraged to hear that the church that's under just as much persecution as they are has stayed the line and is still fighting for the sake of the gospel.

And what an encouragement in a time of struggle to hear that you're not the only one, that there are other people going through what you're going through. That not only do people empathize but they stand with you.

They know of the struggle that you have and want to encourage you. The convictions that we hold are never held in a vacuum. It's nigh on impossible to hold a strong belief about anything about someone disagreeing with you.

[13 : 49] Now I think our culture isn't one that tolerates disagreements well. It masquerades a face of tolerance but as soon as you're on the wrong side of what you're supposed to believe well that mask comes off a bit.

I think it's very hard for us to hold any firm Christian view in our society without eventually achieving some level of abuse. Now this persecution the Thessalonians received wasn't from unknown people.

it was from the people around them. Effectively because of their beliefs their culture has turned on them. This church didn't hold its convictions in a safe and easy environment but under immense pressure and that's right at the heart of why they're able to be such an encouraging example for Paul and the other churches.

I think we can take from this that we should want to be imitators of this church in Thessalonica. What that means would be for us to hold our Christian convictions firmly and publicly even when they are immensely disliked even to the point of active persecution from other areas of our society.

If we hold firmly to the gospel as the authoritative word of God we will come under fire. So what should we do? Well I'd like to say that we have two choices.

[15 : 17] We can either cave in to our culture or we can stand firm with scripture. Now we can make the choice to give up and have an easy life but we know don't we that that's the wrong choice that caving into culture is never going to be a good thing.

But I've got to say it is a choice we have to make. It's not something that's just there naturally that we by osmosis could just stand firm by accident. We have to make that choice. But I want you to imagine if you will that Thessalonians was a different letter.

What if the situation was different? Imagine if the church in Judea had actually given up on the gospel and Paul had to write actually your brothers and sisters over there are no longer following Christ.

Imagine what it would be like to be a Thessalonian believer to feel the discouragement and to some extent the despair to think that actually churches aren't remaining faithful. Or imagine that the Thessalonian church itself had given up and how discouraging that would be for all the churches mentioned in Achaia in Macedonia.

The gospel couldn't have rung out. People would not have heard it. Firmly held convictions aren't of pure benefit for those holding them but also for the strength and endurance of all those who share in them.

[16 : 37] So think how hard would it be for us to stand firm if every other church in Glasgow decided to give up on the gospel? How much more responsibility would we feel if even less places preached the word of God faithfully?

Well instead of that Paul is saying something very different. He's saying to look to other churches for encouragement because of their faithfulness to the gospel.

Now I hope you can think of many churches across Glasgow that are a beautiful picture of standing firm in the gospel under pressure. We should be looking to those churches for our encouragement.

Now for myself I think of St. Peter's Church in Dundee the first church where I heard the gospel faithfully preached and a church which is very much standing firm in the gospel. It's a church that I remain incredibly thankful for and wonderfully there are many other churches like it churches across the whole of Scotland that stand firm in the face of a changing culture and we should take encouragement from that to stand firm ourselves.

I hope the logical conclusion of that though is to say then how can we be an encouragement to other churches? Are we a church that clearly holds up under the weight of an oppressive culture and holds fast to the gospel to be an example to other churches?

[18 : 05] Are there people who could look to us when pressure comes to stand firm in the truth of the gospel and in the authority of the word of God?

Part of our unity with other churches is suffering alongside them in Christ so that that is something that we should search for as a church together and it should be our joy to pursue solidarity with other churches across our country.

So think in the next week how can you encourage a Christian friend who's outside of our church family with what's been going on here at St. Silas? Maybe you've had a really great time in your group recently and you could tell them about that.

Maybe you came to hear Billy McCurry and are really encouraged by his message. We can be a great encouragement to people struggling away for the same gospel by telling them what we've been encouraged by in our own church here.

Standing firm under pressure obviously will be hard and over a long time that day in day out battle can be a real discouragement. If you were to read the other letters that Paul wrote in the New Testament you would find a man who has struggled immensely for the sake of the gospel.

[19 : 23] So what is there to encourage him when pressure comes? What do we do when to be honest the church just feels like it's fighting a losing battle against the opposing forces in society?

Well, my final point then is to look down at verses 15 and 16. Paul says that those persecuting the church in Judea are the Jews who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out.

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.

The wrath of God has come upon them at last. I wonder if any of you feel a bit uncomfortable hearing that last line. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

Why would Paul say something with so much seeming ferocity? Well, first I think we can safely assume that Paul isn't being in any way anti-Semitic here.

[20 : 27] He himself being a Jew and in many other places talking of the church's commitment to share the gospel with Jewish people. I can't imagine him turning around and being thankful for the wrath of God coming upon Jewish people so we can discount that.

I'd also say we can't read this as if it's vengeful as if Paul standing off to one side rubbing his hands together thankful for the wrath of God to come upon people because actually that would be entirely different to anything else we read of Paul.

he has immense compassion for people who do not know Jesus. He does not want the wrath of God to come upon people. So what is Paul actually saying then?

Well, I think it's that Paul is so committed to people hearing the word of God and responding that when an obstacle to the gospel witness is removed he rejoices.

He's thankful when opposition to Jesus' words being heard is taken away. Now Paul is linking the current persecution at that time in the Thessalonian church from Jewish people to the church in Judea and the pressure that they faced from the Jewish people and then actually back into history the Jewish people have spent a long time generations persecuting those speaking God's word whether that was the prophets in the Old Testament whether that was Jesus when he came eventually killing him or whether that's the pressure that they now put upon the apostles and all of the churches to move away from the word of God to not remain faithful.

[22 : 13] Paul goes on to say that by doing this they have heaped up their sins over time and that due to this the wrath of God has come upon them. What Paul is doing here I think is indicating that the word of God has always been under immense pressure all the way through history.

There has never been a time without persecution for God's faithful people. Paul then has an understandable sense of relief when actually that opposition is taken away.

Now we're not told what the wrath of God here is whether that's a specific event or a more general wrath that's come upon anyone who opposes the gospel and doesn't believe.

And we might think it sounds harsh. How could anyone wish the wrath of God on someone? But I would argue that what Paul feels here is something that is actually common to us something that we can understand.

I'm sure some of you have teenagers or know teenagers who are under constant and immense pressure at their schools to turn away from their Christian beliefs that they have been raised with.

[23 : 23] I know working in a university context that sometimes the academic pressure to give up on any kind of religious belief whatsoever is hugely, hugely heavy for some students.

Maybe some of you at work feel that actually the pressure to hide your Christian faith in case it offends people is quite large. And I'm sure to some extent we all feel society's pressure in the refusal to give a Christian voice a place in public debate or in politics.

Now think of the relief that we would all feel were those obstacles removed. For that constant resistance to be taken away and we begin to get some idea of how Paul feels in this passage.

Think of the joy it would be for Christians to live with no opposition to the gospel. But even here in the UK we have it relatively easy. Think how important this passage would be to hear for our brothers and sisters in Iraq and in Syria living under life-threatening persecution for their faith.

Would we not be overjoyed if that persecution was taken away? Thus I think we can understand Paul's relief. Not that a group of people have come under the wrath of God but that an obstacle to the gospel has been taken away.

[24 : 48] Paul holds the authority of God's word and the urgency of people hearing Jesus in so high a place that he's even glad if the wrath of God has come to remove an obstacle that it may spread everywhere.

And that may seem a little far from our experience but I think we must aspire as Paul does to a high view of the word of God. So that's the story of the Thessalonians the Judeans and many other churches in history holding firm to a conviction of the authority of the word of God that took real courage and we must seek as they did to stand firm that we might be of encouragement to many others and rejoice that we have the freedom to share the gospel when we do.

What I want to finish with though is that we actually do face a choice in that matter. There are two ways for the gospel not to be heard.

The first is as we have seen from Paul for the opposition to it to be so immense that the word of God just can't be heard because of persecution. I would argue though that if you were to go to Acts what you find is usually the more persecution there is on the gospel the more the gospel flourishes over time and that is very much the story of Acts that under immense pressure the gospel spread very far and very fast.

The second way though I think is for churches not to hold any firm convictions and just comply to a changing culture. In the end persecution and actually just apathy have similar impacts on evangelism.

[26 : 33] they both lead to the gospel not being shared. Our choice then is either to stand up with clear convictions for God's word willing to receive the abuse and the pressure and the persecution that entails or a second choice to not hold any views that people disagree with and thus to not have any gospel witness.

Either way we need God's help either to form in us a firm conviction of his authority and the truth of his word or help to stand firm in those convictions against the face of an opposing culture.

Let's hope that St. Silas can be a church that people look to as an encouragement and a great example here in Glasgow and that not just Glasgow but the whole of Scotland can look to our church whilst they stand firm in their clear commitments to the authority and truth of the word of God.

So let's ask for God's help in prayer as we seek to do that. Father we thank you for the truth of your word.

We thank you that it speaks with authority over our lives. Lord forgive us for the times when we struggle with that authority when we reject what your word has to say about our lives and about our hearts.

[27 : 57] Lord help us to change help us to have soft hearts and Lord give us boldness and courage by your spirit to live to serve you. Father may our church be a place that can be of great encouragement to our churches.

May we be a place with such firm convictions in your word that others can look to us to get encouragement when they are struggling. And Father that we ask Lord when we want to retire and when we want to retreat from the persecution and the pressure of the world that you would encourage us with your strength in our weakness with your hope in the face of our despair and your joy in the face of our suffering.

Lord may we be happy to be united together with other churches in you and to seek your face in all we do. Amen. I think Andy's going to put up some questions to discuss off the back of that.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.