May your hearts be joyful in the Lord.

Just a short note. I’m pressed for time due to doctor visits and tests in preparation for my upcoming surgery. I don’t have a date yet but it probably won’t be long. Thank you all for your prayers.

In Christ’s love

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1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

A couple weeks ago, we looked over the preceding verses and spent some time on verse 12: “*so that you would walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into* *His own kingdom and glory*.” This is a call to each of us to live a holy life. We don’t follow the ways of the world or its morality. Our decisions must be based on eternity, not simply our future here on earth.

Consider how we might live a life worthy of God. Worthy of a Being who is perfect in all things; who is all-powerful and all good. While this is an impossible goal, it is still one we need to strive for. Why? Because God sacrificed His Son Jesus on our behalf. We owe Him everything and more. He calls us to a holy life of obedience to Him.

But look at what else we are called to, “*His own kingdom and glory*.” We will live in God’s perfect kingdom where there is nothing but beauty and happiness in the midst of God’s unimaginable glory. This is what God has for us. Our call to obedience ought to be a happy calling that we willingly seek out.

Paul begins verse 13 with “*For this reason*”. So, because Paul wants them to walk in a manner worthy of God, he is thankful for how they have received the word of God. If someone doesn’t receive the word of God for what it is, there is no way they can walk in it. If a person won’t accept God’s word as being from God, they have no reason to live according to what it says.

Paul is making a very important point here. The Thessalonians who became Christians understood that the message that Paul brought to them was not something he had made up. It was not something that someone else had made up and Paul was repeating. The Gospel was something that came from God Himself and Paul was just repeating what God said.

We have to understand that the Bible, and the Gospel message it brings, actually record the words of God. It is not something made up by people. This is evident by the prophecies that come true and by the themes and subthemes that are intertwined from beginning to end, even though it was written over a time span of 1600 years. The Bible is not written by men who have had some experience with God and then recorded their memories and viewpoints. God’s Holy Spirit actually guided those who wrote these words originally. The writer’s personalities and styles were used, but the words came from God.

Even now, after almost 2000 years, the Bible translations we have are extremely accurate. Scholars have studied thousands of ancient manuscripts to produce our current Bibles. This is not to mention that almighty God would protect His word from corruption for those who seek the truth.

There are those who seek to discredit the Bible even in the name of establishing true Christianity. Parts will be discarded by claiming they don’t make sense or that some sections don’t fit the writing style of the rest of the book. It will be argued that mythology from surrounding cultures are included in the Bible. Miracles are dismissed as dramatizations. All who engage in this kind of work are nothing more than satan’s workmen. None of their arguments can stand against the fact that the words of the Bible were given by the Holy Spirit.

This is wonderful for us. We are free to believe what we read in God’s word. It’s not like we have to discern the true parts from the fabricated; it’s all true and we can concentrate on studying its meaning under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

The last section of this verse shows the power of God’s word: “*which also is at work in you who believe*”. In Hebrews 4:12 we are told that the word of God is “*living and active*”. Just that concept is worth dwelling on sometime. Now, someone can read the entire Bible and be completely unaffected by it. A perfect example is satan; he certainly knows the contents of the Bible. He quoted from it to Jesus in his attempt to temp Him in the desert. But he does not understand it. If he did, He would not have crucified the Lord of glory. To truly understand the Bible requires the work of the Holy Spirit.

Notice that Paul said “*in you who believe*”. That’s us: we believe in Jesus Christ to salvation and are given the Holy Spirit; He enables us to understand God’s word. Then God’s word begins to work on us; it changes us; it makes us more like Jesus. This change is called sanctification and it is a process that begins when we accept Christ as Saviour and continues until we leave this world.

The work of sanctification belongs to the Holy Spirit; however, we have a lot to do with how fast we are sanctified. A person who has only been a Christian for five years can be much more sanctified that a person who has been one thirty years. A lot of that depends on studying the Bible. The more time we spend in the word, the more that living and active word can work on us.

Think of it as consuming God’s word. Jesus spoke many times of eating His flesh. Remember that Jesus is the Word of God manifest. By consuming the word of God in our Bibles we are partaking of the flesh of Jesus. Just as our bodies need bread to grow and stay strong, our spirits need the spiritual bread of life to grow and stay strong.

Separate the physical from the spiritual. Those who read the Bible in unbelief are simply reading physical words in a physical book to no benefit. Those who read the Bible in belief are consuming spiritual words of God from a spiritual book to their everlasting eternal benefit. Feed on this word. It is truly good for your soul.

In verse 14 Paul talks about the Thessalonians becoming imitators of the Christian church in Judea. Remember back in chapter 1, Paul complemented them on being imitators of himself and of Jesus. This is something they chose directly; they chose to imitate the Christian lifestyle they saw in the missionaries and heard of Jesus. But imitating the church in Judea was something different: they didn’t decide one day that it would be a good idea to get themselves persecuted. It came along all by itself.

The church in Judea was heavily persecuted by the Jewish religious leadership and by the Jewish people who rejected Jesus as Messiah. The Thessalonian church was likewise persecuted by their government leaders and the general non-believing population. Although the Thessalonians didn’t ask for persecution, it came; but when it did, they accepted it, just like their fellow Christians in Judea. In this way they imitated them.

Also, their willingness to accept this persecution was another demonstration of the powerful word of
God working in the lives of the Thessalonians. The living and active word enabled them to hold fast to the Gospel during suffering, while continuing to love others. Love is the defining part; other fanatical beliefs can endure suffering for their cause, but there is no love.

Jesus promised His disciples right from the start that they would be persecuted. Jesus was persecuted and it has gone on ever since. What the church in Thessalonica experienced was not unexpected and was nothing new. In fact, as we read further in this letter, we will find that Paul became anxious and had to send Timothy to make sure the church was enduring. It was; and we must also.

This is not to say that Christians ought to go looking for persecution or martyrdom. In Fox’s Book of Martyrs, there is an account of a young monk who believed that God was calling him to be a martyr. As he prayed, he felt that God was calling him to this end. He spoke about this with one of his religious superiors, who encouraged him to follow up on this as a way to glorify God.

This was several centuries ago, so the monk simply found a group of Muslims, walked up to them, and proceeded to tell them about Jesus. It worked, they killed him. The tragic thing about this is that his action was in complete opposition to the Bible. God never promotes suicide. Giving one’s life for another is one thing, but simply getting oneself killed is a different matter.

The Bible tells us of several times that Paul was snuck out of town for his own safety. It is perfectly acceptable for a Christian to escape persecution or martyrdom if possible; as long as it doesn’t involve denying Christ. Our job is to live holy, quiet lives; loving God and fellow men; and spreading the Gospel. If God so chooses to have you glorify Him by martyrdom, He’ll work it out. Don’t go looking for it.

Paul goes on to give an overview of the hostility the Jews had toward the Christian church*. [W]ho both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all people, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved*. Paul is letting them know that their suffering is simply following the same pattern that began in the birthplace of Christianity. As we read the Old Testament and the book of Acts, it is easy to see that everything Paul says is true. Again, he is comforting the Thessalonians; their persecution is nothing new or unexpected. They are simply experiencing what comes with the faithful Christian life.

These words that Paul wrote sound, and are, very harsh. They have been misunderstood and misused for centuries. We must be careful that we understand what Paul is saying in the context of the whole Bible.

For one thing, these words have been used to justify antisemitism. The church itself, in the middle ages, forced the Jews to live in poverty. The Jews became victims of the crusades. Even some of the Christian leadership, from the early church fathers, to the reformers, and still today, preach against the Jewish people and their nation. These are obviously twisted ideas that come from satan. His goal has always been to destroy the nation of Israel; the people of God.

The Bible is clear that the Jews are God’s chosen people. God makes very clear promises to Abram in Genesis 12-15, even sealing them with a covenant. The important thing is that these promises are entirely on God’s side of the covenant; they have nothing to do with Israel’s behavior. God is unchanging so His promises remain intact.

One of the promises is that Israel will possess the land of Canaan. This has not yet been entirely fulfilled and it won’t be until the millennial reign of Christ. But God will not go back on His promises, so we know that the Jews are still His people. Additionally, there are many promises made through the prophets that God will soften the hearts of His people so that they can become the nation of priests they are meant to be.

Another misuse of this passage is by saying that Paul himself was against the Jews and attacking them with these words. Again, this needs to be considered in the context of Paul’s other writings. He is careful to point out that the Jews are blessed of God by receiving the Law. Also, in rewards of Christianity, it is the Jew first, and then the Gentile.

In Romans 9:1-5, Paul explains that he would be willing to give up his own salvation if his fellow Israelites could be saved. In 10:1, He professes his deep desire and prayers for their salvation. These are not the words of a man who desired harm to the Jewish people.

Paul is simply stating facts. When he says “the Jews”, he isn’t referring to every single one of them; God has always had His faithful remanent and there were many Jews who accepted Jesus as the Messiah. The Jews had a long history of persecuting the prophets. They did kill Jesus; but so did the Romans, and so did you and I. The book of Acts records how violently they attacked and badgered Paul; trying to stop his missionary work and that of the other apostles.

Actions have consequences. These actions resulted in the Jews filling up the measure of their sins. God, in His mercy, allows people to continue in their sin in hopes that they will turn to Him. But these sins are not just brushed aside; they are stored up. When they reach a certain point, God will pour out His judgement in wrath.

This theme comes up repeatedly in the Bible. God destroyed life on earth when it got to the point that Noah was the only righteous man on earth. Noah and his family were the only ones saved. God destroyed Sodom and the other cities of that valley when He found no-one righteous there except Lot, whom He saved with his family. In Genesis 15:16, God told Abram “*the iniquity of the Amorite is not yet complete*”. “Amorite” was a short way of saying all the nations that were in the land of Canaan. It would be 400 years before God brought the descendants of Abram into Canaan. When the time came, Israel was told by God to completely wipe out all the inhabitants of the land. They had filled up the measure of their iniquity.

Paul says that wrath has come upon the Jews. This is true in two senses. First, the Jews were undergoing suffering at that time; both natural disaster and inflicted by the Romans. That suffering has continued to this day. Secondly, there is the sense that this wrath is hanging over the Jews until the time comes for it to be poured out. This will take place during the seven-year tribulation period.

There is an important difference between the wrath poured out on the gentile nations and on the Jews. The wrath on the gentiles called for complete destruction. The wrath on the Jews will bring about their redemption. God is faithful to His people.

We Christians are safe from the wrath of God even though we deserve it. The wrath reserved for us was poured out on Jesus Christ. This does not give us license to continue in sin; to the contrary, it gives us all the more reason to strive for a holy life, pleasing to God.

Prayer

Merciful God, thank You for Your living word that works in our lives, makes us more like Christ, and brings us into closer fellowship with You. May that word change us; soften our hard hearts to love You and to love others. Give us the courage to humbly accept persecution, knowing that it is an honor and a blessing to suffer for the name of Christ.

We pray for Your people Israel. May that partial hardening of their hearts be lifted so that they can accept Jesus as the true Messiah and be saved. Be merciful to Your people, fulfilling Your promises to them that You may be glorified. Protect them, Lord, from all the hostility that surrounds them, both physical and spiritual.

We are grateful to You, Lord Jesus, for taking the wrath that we deserve. And we thank You for the gift of the Holy Spirit. We invite Him to work in our lives: to discern Your will, to hold fast to Your commands, to resist temptation and avoid sin, and to bring You glory in all we say and do. We are Your humble and unworthy servants.

In Jesus’ name

Amen