NOT AS THE WORD OF MEN, BUT THE WORD OF GOD

1 Thessalonians 2:1-16

Key Verse: 2:13

“And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.”

Chapter 1 is mainly about the church of the Thessalonians in Paul’s thanksgiving for the church. The Thessalonian church was an exemplary church as the church of faith, love and hope in the Lord Christ Jesus. The gospel worked mightily in the former slaves of idols and carnal desires with the power of the Holy Spirit, changing them to become imitators of the Lord and to serve the living and true God, waiting for God’s Son, Jesus, from heaven. Today’s passage, chapter 2:1-16, is mainly about Paul’s life as a gospel worker or a shepherd for God’s flock. It involves his appeal against the false accusations and going further beyond that polemic/defence to describe his shepherd life in the metaphor of a mother and a father. And in today’s passage, Paul also continually thanks to God for the Thessalonian believers’ good attitude toward the word of God and their perseverance in their own sufferings. In this study, we can certainly learn what kind of believers God wants us to be and further what kind of gospel workers he wants us to be.

**First, Paul’s appeal against false accusations (1-6).** Paul says in verses 1 and 2, “You know, brothers, that our visit to you was not a failure. We had previously suffered and been insulted in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God we dared to tell you his gospel in spite of strong opposition.” As we thought about in the introduction, in Philippi, Paul and Silas were beaten, severely flogged, and imprisoned, simply because they did the work of preaching the gospel and driving out evil spirits. However, by God’s mighty power they were miraculously released. Although their physical bodies must not have been in a healthy condition after such mistreatment, they walked approximately 160 km and came to Thessalonica. There was another strong opposition in Thessalonica, but they could be bold and courageous in God to tell the gospel of God to them. Then God worked powerfully as we studied in chapter 1. So, in fact Paul’s visit to Thessalonica was a success with great effect. However, we go deeper into the reason of not being failure of his visit to Thessalonica in the following verses.

Then Paul says in verse 3, “For the appeal we make does not spring from error or impure motives, nor are we trying to trick you.” The powerful work in Thessalonica clearly was none other than the work of God through Paul. But the gospel enemies slandered Paul to discredit the gospel work, driving out Paul and his fellow workers. They propagandized that Paul was like all other false teachers of that time, who had exploited people for their own benefit. In this letter, Paul had to appeal for the sake of God’s flock there.

First of all, he says that his appeal does not spring from error. Here “error” is in Greek *plane*, meaning to wander, to roam, from which the English term “planet” came. Instead of coming from error, his appeal springs from the standard of God’s truth. What Paul did was preaching the gospel of God, which is the very truth of God. Rather, he was committed to the truth of God. Paul further appeals that he has nothing to do with impure motives or any attempt to deceive.

He clearly states, “On the contrary, we speak as men approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please men, but God, who tests our hearts.” Here we see that his appeal is not just on a human level, but goes up to God in relation with him. The ground of his assertion is God. God approved him and entrusted him with the gospel. Paul said in 1 Timothy 1:11-13, “that confirms to the glorious gospel of the blessed One, which he entrusted to me. I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has given me strength, that he considered me faithful, appointing me to his service. Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy…” In this grace of Christ Jesus, how he lived is well stated in his meeting with the elders of Ephesus, “…I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace” (Ac 20:24).

Here in Thessalonians, Paul’s life purpose was very clear in this grace of Christ Jesus: “We are not trying to please men but God, who tests our hearts.” He also stated this in Galatians 1:10, “Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ.” How crystal clear his life purpose is! Men only see outward appearance of man and surface of things (1 Sa 16:7), but God sees and tests our hearts. The risen Christ who eyes are like blazing fire said in Revelation 2:23, “…I am he who searches hearts and minds, and I will repay each of you according to your deeds.” There are men’s judgements and human courts but what really matters is God’s judgment and the divine court. Truly the ground of our appealing or suing should be God and his judgment and his heavenly court, living with a clear life purpose to please him. Here we see whether being a failure or not in serving the gospel ministry largely relies on one’s pure motive and striving to please God.

Paul further speaks in verse 5, “You know we never used flattery, nor did we put on a mask to cover up greed—God is our witness.” In Paul’s appeal this part seems to be trivial and even unnecessary. Yet, it is important to clear up such matters since the opponents accused him of these. Samuel also said in his farewell speech in 1 Samuel 13:3, “…Whose ox have I taken? Whose donkey have I taken? Whom have I cheated?...” Paul also said in his farewell speech to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:33-34, “I have not coveted anyone’s silver or gold or clothing…” Here in Thessalonians Paul even clearly said, “God is our witness.” He always had God as his witness, though the Thessalonians were undeniable human witnesses, experiencing with Paul and knowing how he lived among them.

And Paul clarifies it again in verse 6, “We were not looking for praise from people, not from you or anyone else, even though as apostles of Christ we could have asserted our authority.” It is not easy for human beings to overcome praise from other human beings as well as accusations from others. This is one reason of the failure of the Jews in believing Jesus. Jesus said in John 5:44, “How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?”

In this part of Paul’s appeal against false accusation, we learn the qualities of gospel servants: no error, no impure motives, no deception, no flattery, no cover up for greed, but commitment to the truth, God’s approval, clear life purpose to please God and having God as witness.

**Second, Paul’s mother and father-like heart (7-12).** Now Paul says in verse 7, “But we were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.” Here is a transition. His appeal against the accusation could be a negative contention. Now here is his positive one. His saying is like this, “I am not an exploiter but I am like a nursing mother.” What a contrast between a greedy aggressive exploiter and a gentle tender caring mother! Once again, we read in verse 7, “We were gentle among you, like a mother caring for her little children.” In other translations, “…we were gentle among you, like a nursing mother caring for her children” or “…as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.” How can we express the relationship between a nursing mother and her infant baby? We can say that it is the most intimate, tender, cherishing human relationship; there is none to match it in all of human life. Surprisingly, Paul used this metaphor to describe his shepherd life.

We can imagine the picture of a mother taking her little one in her arms, tenderly caring or cherishing her. Here, “to cherish” is in Greek *thalpó*, which has also the meaning of “to warm.” As a mother takes her little one in her arms, she warms the little life with her own body heat and passes on her life to that life. The beauty of that tenderness and intimacy is God’s given beauty of a mother’s nature.

Jesus once said in Matthew 11:28-29, “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.” And it is also written in Matthew 12:20, “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out, till he leads justice to victory.”

Here in Thessalonians, Paul continues the description in the relation to the metaphor of a mother in verse 8, “We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.” Paul, out of a strong affection, he was willing and delighted to share with them the gospel of God which would save them but also his life as well for their growth. Here, “share” is in other translations “impart.” And the word ‘lives” is in Greek *psuché*, with the meaning “breathe”, “the soul.” In his deep love, Paul was willing to give the message of the gospel but also give his own life, his own soul, his very self, the totality of his life. That’s what a mother does out of her strong affection for her baby.

Then Paul says in verse 9, “Surely you remember, brothers, our toil and hardship; we worked night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preached the gospel of God to you.” Here, toil means physical labour and hardship, difficulties in life. Who can work night and day? But Paul confessed that he did so, which they could remember, meaning he was willing to bear any labour and travail for their sake. This is also clearly the expression of a mother’s sacrifice, serving the baby night and day.

We are reminded of Jesus’ statement concerning his life in Mark 10:45, “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Then Paul changes the metaphor from a mother to a father in verses 10-12: “You are witnesses, and so is God, of how holy, righteous and blameless we were among you who believed. For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” In this description, a father’s role is very much like discipling. A father lives substantial, holy, righteous and blameless; holy, pious or devout before God, righteous and just before God and men, and blameless, without blame, particularly before men. It is in accordance with what Jesus said in his prayer for his disciples to God: “Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth…For them I sanctify myself, that they too may be truly sanctified.” (Jn 17:17-19).

Then in verses 11 and 12 Paul says, “For you know that we dealt with each of you as a father deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting and urging you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” Here Paul describes a father’s role succinctly. We can understand better when we refer to other translations, “exhorting, encouraging and imploring or charging”. It will be meaningful to think of these words.

The word “exhort” is in Greek *parakale*, which is related to the word *paraklétos*, the Counselor that is the Holy Spirit, the one who comes alongside to move in a specific course of conduct. So a father gets alongside his child and moves that child in a specific course of conduct. God said to Abraham in Genesis 18:18-19, “Abraham will surely become a great and powerful nation, and all nations on earth will be blessed through him. For I have chosen him, so that he will direct his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing what is right and just, so that the LORD will bring about for Abraham what he has promised him.” This would be Abraham’s role as a father for the fulfillment of God’s promise.

After exhorting the fatherly task is to encourage the emotion and the will to act in that course. So a father may say in exhortation, “This is the way to walk” and in encouragement, “I know it's tough but keep doing it; be strong and courageous.”

And the word “implore” or “charge” is in Greek *marturomai*, meaning “witness.” A father is supposed to witness to his child, that is, to have a responsibility to a solemn charge. Then a father’s whole speech is like, “Here is the course of conduct. I know the way is hard but keep doing it. And just to encourage you a little further. This is the way of life; the consequence of the other way is death.” And that’s where discipline comes in.

Moses said to the Israelites in Deuteronomy 30:19, “This day I call heaven and earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life, so that you and your children may live…” A father’s charging can be like this.

And the father wants to produce the product at the end. Verse 12 continues, “…you to live lives worthy of God, who calls you into his kingdom and glory.” What a great and glorious end it will be! We can say that the difference between the mothering and the fathering is the mother wants to provide all that is needed in the moment in her gentle care and sacrifice, and the father wants to produce the product at the end through his exhorting and encouraging and charging. A shepherd needs both the mothering and the fathering.

**Third, Thessalonians’ attitude toward the word of God and their perseverance (13-16).** Now Paul says in verse 13, “And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.” This verse can be one of the most important verses in the Bible, one’s attitude toward the word of God. I believe that this is one clear reason for the Thessalonian church to be an example to all other churches.

As for us, who can truly believe the words of the Bible as the words of God absolutely? We are living in a time when relativistic ideas are overflowing. Even many Christians have become relativistic towards the words of the Bible. What happens when absoluteness is removed from the Bible? We can go back to the beginning. In Genesis, God prepared the Garden of Eden for Adam and gave it to him along with Adam’s Bible. God said to him, “You are free to eat from any true in the garden, but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it, you will surely die.” God’s word was clear and absolute. However, Adam and Eve did not pay careful attention to the word of God. Then they became the prey of Satan. The devil attacked them by distorting and questioning God’s word, “Did God really say, ‘You must not eat from any tree in the garden’?” In this way, the devil planted doubt concerning the word of God in them. Subsequently their thinking became relativistic, especially regarding God’s judgment message, “You will surely die.” As a result, they fell from the kingdom of God to the kingdom of Satan and the whole history of mankind changed. At the time of Noah, God sent his judgment message to destroy the earth through the flood for quite a long time. But the people of the whole world rejected the word of God’s judgement message, and finally all were swept away. Only Noah took the word seriously with absolute faith and prepared himself and his family for the judgement and in the end they were saved from the dreadful flood judgment. At the time of the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Lot’s sons-in-law regarded the message of God’s judgment as a joke, and were destroyed with all other people of the cities by burning sulfur from heaven. The most repeated message of the Bible is Jesus’ second coming to judge everyone. Yet, who truly believes this is a great question. Jesus clearly said, “At that time the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and all the nations of the earth will mourn. They will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky, with power and great glory” (Mt24:30). Then he continued, “Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away” (Mt 24:35). Believing one word of God absolutely is being set on the right track of life.

Even in the Old Testament the Egyptians who feared the word of God was saved from the plagues God had poured on that nation. Exodus 9:20, “Those officials of Pharaoh who feared the word of the LORD hurried to bring their slaves and their livestock inside. But those who ignored the word of the LORD left their slaves and livestock in the field.” Isaiah 66:2 says, “This is the one I esteem: he who is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word.”

Psalm 19:7-8 says, “The law of the LORD is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the LORD are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the LORD are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the LORD are radiant, giving light to the eyes.” And 2 Timothy 3:16 says, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuke, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.” May we believe the words of the Bible truly as the words of God and build our lives firmly on them one word after another and be thoroughly equipped for every good work, each growing as a mother and father-like shepherd.

When the Thessalonians accepted the word of God, not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, they could overcome persecutions becoming imitators of God’s churches in Judea. Paul says in verses 14-16, For you, brothers, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men 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.” The Jews are a sharp contrast to the Thessalonians.

May we accept the words of the Bible as the words of God in this relativistic generation and be raised as truthful gospel servants and mother and father-like shepherds for God’s flock of sheep!