Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

A People to Be Glad For
Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:13-14
Code: 52-7

As we come together to worship the Lord, we focus in part upon His Word in order that we might know the God we worship and His plan for us and His will for our lives. Our text, this morning, comes from 1 Thessalonians chapter 2. And we come to the next paragraph in this wonderful letter from the Apostle Paul, verses 13 through 16.

The plan of redemption is a bitter/sweet reality. When one looks at what God has provided in His saving purposes, the sweetness comes in the contemplation of eternal life, eternal bliss, eternal glory. The bitterness comes in the contemplation of eternal damnation, eternal shame, eternal punishment. One might say that the high point of redemption history, the apex is God in Christ redeeming lost sinners for eternal glory. On the other hand, the low point of redemptive history, the nadir is God in Christ condemning lost sinners to eternal shame. Little question exists in the mind of many of us who understand God's plan, that it is a bitter/sweet reality.

To respond to God's Word and God's provision of salvation in Jesus Christ is glory and joy and reward forever. To reject God's Word and God's salvation in Jesus Christ is shame and punishment and sorrow forever. The contrast within this redemptive plan has existed since inception. God has from the very beginning said, "Here is the way," for those who accept it there is life, for those who reject it there is death. And so there is a dividing line that runs down through all of human history that separates the sweet from the bitter, the glory from the shame, the reward from the punishment, the blessing from the cursing.

I suppose this contrast between those who are redeemed and blessed and those who are condemned and cursed is nowhere more dramatic than in he consideration of those who have had the greatest spiritual privilege, the greatest spiritual opportunity and wasted that opportunity. To look through redemptive history at those who were given high privilege of exposure to the truth in its fullness and who turned their backs on God is undoubtedly the most dramatic presentation of the bitter/sweet reality of redemption. The more exposed a person is to truth, the more tragic becomes their rejection.

If we were to look at the Old Testament we might identify Cain. In my own mind, I cannot imagine a greater illustration of wasted privilege. a greater illustration of lost opportunity than Cain. Cain had, to put it mildly, immense spiritual privilege. Born to Adam he thereby had a father who had known sinlessness and sinfulness, and who like any man who had ever lived thereafter could explain to his

son the benefits of sinlessness. Adam was a man who intimate and personal communion with the living God as he walked and talked with God in the cool of the day in the garden. Adam was a man who had unmitigated authority to be king of the earth with all the fullness of the blessing of God to support and sustain that. Adam was a man who lived in bliss. Adam was a man who knew perfect communion and compatibility with a woman. Adam was a man who perfectly understood righteousness, who knew goodness in its wholeness. And Adam must have passed it on to Cain. Cain was privileged to have a father like no other father who ever existed. The lessons that Cain must have heard at the feet of Adam would be the profoundest that any son could ever hear.

Cain obviously was also instructed about the truth of God, about what pleased God, about God's will, about how to worship God, how to honor God, how to respond to God, how to treat God from one who knew very well, and yet Cain was an apostate. Cain rejected God. He rejected God's Word. He rejected God's salvation. He spurned righteousness, it says in Hebrews 11:4. He chose to follow Satan, says 1 John 3:12. And he was destroyed eternally, says Jude 11. The most tragic illustration of lost opportunity. The bitterest of the bitter, so very close to the sweetness of redemption and yet so far.

And if we were to come to the New Testament and look for one equal to Cain, one who had immense experiential privilege and wasted it, we would have to not look too long until we discovered a man by the name of Judas. If Cain had the privilege of sitting at the feet of Adam, Judas had a greater privilege sitting at the feet of Jesus Christ. Judas experienced what only twelve men on the face of the earth experienced, intimacy with Jesus Christ. Judas head what He said and Judas saw what He did. Judas felt His attitudes and expressions, watched His reactions, could see the absolute and utter perfection of His character. Judas in his mind would have understood the truth that Jesus taught. He had the greatest spiritual opportunity ever offered to any human being but he rejected God, he rejected Christ, he rejected the Word of God. He sold Jesus for money, committed suicide and went to eternal hell.

Now whether you're talking about Cain or whether you're talking about Judas, you're talking about tragedy of massive proportions when one given unlimited opportunity to know God turns his back on it. The greater the opportunity, the greater the tragedy of rejection, the greater the eternal punishment.

In addition to these individuals from the Old and the New Testament, there is a group of people who sweep from the Old Testament in to the New Testament who also illustrate the great tragedy of rejected opportunity and they are the people that we know as the Jews, Israel. On a collective level they illustrate to us the ultimate tragedy of apostasy. Given the privilege of having received the oracles of God, Paul says in Romans 3, given the privileges of having received more than just the oracles of God but also the adoption, the glory, the covenants, the giving of the law, the temple service and the promises, says Paul in Romans 9, the Jews nevertheless rejected God, rejected

God's Word, rejected God's Messiah and for the most part continued to do so. They collectively represent the greatest tragedy of lost opportunity.

In contrast to that you have the Thessalonians. Their opportunity to hear the gospel was very limited. It occurred in a few weeks. Three Sabbaths Paul came in Acts 17 to Thessalonica and reasoned out of the Scripture and then stayed on preaching perhaps for a few more weeks at best. They had very limited opportunity to hear the truth and they believed. This contrast is in the mind of Paul in our text. In fact, he is somewhat struck by it as he compares the Thessalonians who believed with very limited opportunity in a short space of time and the Jews who rejected with unlimited opportunity in a very great space of time.

Follow his contrast as I begin reading in verse 13. "And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the Word of God's message, 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. 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 hand of your own countrymen even as they did from the Jews who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved with a result that they always fill up the measure of their sins but wrath has come upon them to the utmost."

It's an amazing shift of gears in the middle of this passage. As he mentions the word "Jews" in verse 14 it's as if it triggers something in his heart and in a passage initially designed to commend the Thessalonian church and thank God for what they are, as he mentions the word "Jews" he immediately in his inspired remembrance recognizes how they are the very antithesis. How thankful he is for the Thessalonians who with limited opportunity believed in contrast to the Jews with unlimited opportunity rejected and are, of all people, on the face of the earth, the most tragic.

And so what you have in this section is a people to be glad for and a people to be sad for; a people who are blessed and a people who are cursed. God through His many prophets offered Israel blessing or cursing. Sadly they chose cursing. God through His few apostles offered the Thessalonians blessing or cursing and gladly they chose blessing...gladly they chose blessing. In these verses then Paul relates to both. He gives three reasons why he is glad for the Thessalonians and three contrasting reasons why he is sad for the Jews. Obviously at this point in the letter we're aware that Paul was thrilled with the whole history of the Thessalonian church. If you've been with us you know how he feels. In fact, to be real honest with you, he doesn't even get into the main subject until the word "finally" in chapter 4. He spends the first three chapters extolling the ministry among the Thessalonians. He is thrilled with what God has done. And I think it has so captured his fascination because it is so evidently the work of God.

Though good men came to the Thessalonians, namely Paul, Silas and Timothy, they stayed but a brief, brief time. Thessalonica was a very pagan city of both a seaport and a trade route, filled with the worst kind of life style and evil. And also, a haven for false religionists, fakers, quacks, crackpots, purveyors of lies who would beguile unstable souls. And he being only able to spend a few weeks there after some months of being absent sent Timothy back to find out if the church had defected because he was fearful that that might happen. In chapter 3 verse 5 he writes, "For this reason when I could endure it no longer I also sent to find out about your faith for fear that the tempter might have tempted you and our labor should be in vain." He was so deeply concerned about them but when the report came back, "Timothy has come to us from you and brought us good news of your faith and love and that you always think kindly of us longing to see us just as we also long to see you, for this reason, brethren, in all our distress and affliction we were comforted about you through your faith." The news was all good.

And so, he writes back and says, "I know what kind of church you are...in chapter 1...you're in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, you are brethren beloved of God, you are the elect, you have a faith that works, you have a love that labors, you have a hope that endures. You've become imitators of us and of the Lord. You're examples of how to live the Christian life. The Word is sounding out from you. Your life is transformed so that you serve the living and true God and you're waiting for the return of Jesus Christ." They were a noble church. They had all the evidences of genuineness and he was moved to thank God for them.

So after reciting the character of the church in chapter 1 and talking about the nature of his own ministry in chapter 2 verses 1 to 12, and now in chapter 2 verse 13 he starts to thank God for them and his heart is full of gratitude. In his expression of thanks, however, he can't resist the contrast.

This morning we're going to look at group one, a people to be glad for. Next Lord's day group, a people to be sad for. Look at verse 13. "And for this reason we also constantly thank God." Stop at that point for a moment.

We also constantly thank God, he says. Similar to what he said in chapter 1 verse 2, "We give thanks to God always for all of you." He had a thankful heart. And he recognized always that the source of all spiritual progress was God. When he wrote to the Roman church in chapter 1 verse 8, "I thank my God through Jesus Christ for you all." He always acknowledged that it was God who was the power, that it was God who was the resource. It was God who was doing the work. His own experience with them receiving the gospel, being genuinely converted, his own experience of nurturing that for a brief time and then their marvelous spiritual growth and development and witness that was reaching the world, made him very clear on the fact that God was at work in a unique way in Thessalonica. They were a church to rejoice over. They were a church to be glad for.

Then he says in verse 13, "And for this reason we also constantly thank God." And then he launches into the reason. For what reason? "That when you..." and he goes forward. The majority of commentators I read say that the phrase "and for this reason" moves the reader forward from his thanksgiving to the reason for it. Certainly that's what you have in chapter 1 as in verse 2 he gives his thanks and then immediately in verse 3 he gives his reason for it. I would favor that view that Paul is saying, "Here's the reason why I'm so thankful for you, here's what makes you a church to be glad for," and then he launches off into a three-fold reason...a three-fold reason, three parts to his reason.

Number one, the first thing for which he was thankful was for their reception of the Word. "For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the Word of God's message, 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." The first thing that made him thankful was their reception of the Word. This is the starting point of his gladness. And, beloved, they were a church that had a right response, they were a people who had a right response to the Word of God. In verse 6 of chapter 1, "They received the Word," even though there was much tribulation, even though the price was high they received it with the joy of the Holy Spirit. They were a plowed field. They were good ground. They were prepared hearts and they received the Word mixed with faith.

Now there's much rich spiritual food in this verse and I don't want to belabor it but I want to kind of give it to you bite by bite. Notice that phrase "that when you received from us." Paul here is harking back to his initial arrival at Thessalonica in Acts chapter 17. He, Timothy and Silas brought them the saving sanctifying gospel and they received it...they received it. That verb there, paralambano, refers to an outward external listening. When he came into the synagogue on those three Sabbaths and then elsewhere in the city, and preached the gospel, there was an objective reception. They listened to him. They heard what he had to say. And what they heard, he says, was the Word of God's message...the Word of God's message. That's an interesting little phrase, literally the Greek text says, "A Word heard from us out from God." You heard from us the Word of God. That's the idea. It was our's as to speaking, it was God's as to source. It was God's Word that we spoke. And when you were listening you were hearing God's Word through us. They were God's mouthpiece to speak God's Word. The message came from God. That's why Paul identifies what he preached in chapter 2 verse 2 as the gospel of God. God's gospel, God's as to subject, God's as to source. Verse 8 again, "The gospel of God." Verse 9 again, "The gospel of God." It came from God, it originated with God, it was His. And so Paul says when we spoke to you we spoke God's Word inspired. Paul was God's tool to speak God's Word, to write God's Word down...that's what the New Testament is, as well as the Old.

So the message which the apostles preached came from God. It was God's word. It wasn't the word of Paul, it wasn't the word of some committee, it wasn't consensus. It wasn't something that he had received from someone else. In Acts 8, for example, verse 14, "When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the Word of God they sent them Peter and John." Those preachers

who went out to Samaria, including Philip, to preach didn't preach their own message, they preached the Word of God. The Word coming from God. In Acts chapter 13 verse 44, Paul and Barnabas, "The whole city assembled to hear the Word of God."

When the apostles spoke it wasn't human opinion. The Thessalonians were used to that. They were a crossroads of the world, I told you, they were a seaport at the peak of the Aegean Sea, the entrance to all of southern Europe. They were right in the middle of the Egnatian Highway which ran from the Orient to the Occident, east to west. They were the crossroads of the world and the purveyors of every false philosophy around and every satanic darkness would arrive at that place to capture the beguiled souls of men along with their sexual favors, their money, their possessions. And so it was a hot bed of human oratory, wisdom, rhetoric and satanic false teaching. Paul says you heard what we said and you heard it as God's message.

Then he says this in verse 13, "You accepted it...you accepted it." That's a different verb, dechomai. Here we have a subjective reception. They heard God's Word with their ear and they accepted it with their hearts. Here was the inward welcome. Now the Word goes from the mind to the soul, as it were. This indicates their initiative in eagerly embracing the message, a definite act of saving faith. Back in Acts chapter 17, you remember, when Paul came to Thessalonica and explained about Christ and His death and His resurrection and so forth, it says, "Some of them were persuaded, joined Paul, joined Silas along with a great multitude of God-fearing Greeks and a number of leading women." What happened was, people got converted. Jews got converted. Greeks got converted, or Gentiles, leading women got converted. They received the Word in the hearing and they accepted it, as it were, in the heart.

Romans 10:17 says, "Faith comes by hearing, hearing by the Word of Christ." But Romans 10 also says, "You must believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead and confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord." So Paul says to them, "I'm so grateful for your reception of the Word. You heard God's message and you received it, you took it in, it became your own."

And you heard it, he says, look at this, back to verse 13, "Not as the word of men." Not just another human message. Not another philosopher, another teacher, another religious leader, not another speaker, not another orator, not more rhetoric, not human wisdom, human opinion, carnal viewpoint, you heard it as it was, not the word of man, but the Word of God.

Paul made very clear that anyone who reads what he wrote and who hears the echo of what he preaches understands the Word of God. In 1 Corinthians 15 he says, "I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you which also you received in which also you stand by which also you're saved." And then he says, "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received." You received it, I received it. I didn't make it up, I didn't invent it, I received it.

You say, "But wait a minute, where did he receive it? From whom?" Galatians 1, "I would have you know, brethren, that the gospel which was preached to me was not according to man," verse 11. So wherever he received it, it wasn't from man. Verse 12, "I received it neither from man nor was I taught it, but received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." He got it from God. He got it from God.

In the fourth chapter of 1 Thessalonians verse 15, you might look at a note there. He says this, "We say to you by the Word of the Lord." What the man preached, what he taught, what he wrote was the Word from God. He didn't preach human wisdom. And so they didn't hear human wisdom and they didn't receive human wisdom. So he says, "I thank God that when you received from us the Word of God's message you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the Word of God." For what it really is, alethos, what it truly is, what it genuinely is...the Word of God.

Peter is so right when he says, "Holy men of God were moved by the Holy Spirit." And what they wrote was the Word of God. All Scripture is God breathed, 2 Timothy 3:16. So he says you received the Word of God.

Now follow this thought. The Word of God is not empty, it is not impotent, it is not inert like the word of men. So the end of verse 13 says, "Which also performs its work in you who believe." That's a great statement.

It performs. That verb almost always used in the New Testament refers to supernatural action and most often to God's supernatural action. For example, 1 Corinthians chapter 12 verse 6, "The same God who works all things in all." In other words, all of you believers, whatever is going on in your life to the good of God and His glory, He is working in you. Philippians 2:13, again where it says, "It is God who is at work in you doing His will." So this verb "to perform" primarily refers to God who is at work.

So, the Word is supernaturally by the power of God performing its work in you who believe. He's so thrilled. When you see a redeemed community of people, you can be thrilled that if they have received the Word of God as the Word of God and not the word of men, and if they have taken it into their hearts and believed it, then that Word by the power of God's Spirit is performing in them. It's working in them. That verb means to work effectively, efficiently, productively on a supernatural level as energized by God. That's one of the great truths of the Christian life, beloved, that the Word of God works in us, it performs effectively, efficiently, productively, powerfully.

I might ask the question...how does it work? What specifically? Well, let me just give you a little list, just listen to this and stay with this. Here is what the Word does in you and in any believer. By the way, I might add that note, it performs its work only in you who are believing, only in believers. It doesn't work in the unbeliever. The only thing the Word will do in the unbeliever is...what?...convict.

But in the believer it is performing glorious things.

For example, it saves us...it saves us. "You have been born again not of seed which is perishable, but unperishable," 1 Peter 1:23 says. "That is through the living and abiding Word of God." James 1:18, "He brought us forth by His Word."

Furthermore, it blesses us. Luke 11:28, "Blessed is the one who hears the Word of God and obeys it." That's His work in us. It teaches us, 2 Timothy 3:16, "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for teaching."

It also reproves us. "It is profitable for reproof."

It also corrects us. "It is profitable for correction.

It also trains us in righteousness. "It is profitable for training in righteousness."

It also perfects and equips us that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly equipped for every good work.

The Word of God working in us also guides us. Psalm 119:105, "Thy Word is a lamp unto my feet, a light to my path."

It counsels us. Psalm 119:24, "Thy testimonies also are my delight, they are my counselors."

It revives us. Psalm 119:154 says, "Revive me according to Thy Word."

It makes us fruitful. Colossians 1 says, "The Word of truth which has come to you is constantly bearing fruit...constantly bearing fruit."

It grows us up. First Peter says, "We're to long for the pure milk of the Word whereby we grow."

It warns us. Psalm 19:11, "By the Word Thy servant is warned."

It rewards us. "In keeping them there is great reward," same verse.

The Word of God works in us to judge us. Hebrews 4:12 says, "That it pierces as far as the division of soul and spirit, joints and marrow and is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart."

It sanctifies us. John 17:17, Jesus prayed that marvelous prayer, "Sanctify them by Thy truth, Thy Word is truth."

It purges us. John 15:3, "We are cleansed by the Word."

It frees us. John 8, "The truth shall make you free, John 8:31 and 32.

It enriches us. "Let the Word of Christ richly dwell in you leading to all wisdom, teaching, admonishments, psalms, hymns, spiritual songs, thanksgiving."

It gives us joy. John writes, "These things that are joy might be full," 1 John 1:4.

It protects us. "Thy Word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee."

It strengthens us...I love this. Psalm 119:28, "My soul weeps because of grief, strengthen me according to Thy Word."

It makes us wise. Psalm 119:97 to 100, "O how I love Thy law, it is my meditation all the day, Thy commandments make me wiser than my enemies for they are ever mine. I have more insight than all my teachers for Thy testimonies are my meditation. I understand more than the aged because I have observed Thy precepts, yes it makes us wise."

It prospers us. "The man who is in the Word will be like," says the psalmist in Psalm 1, "a tree firmly planted by streams of water which yield its fruit in a season and its leaf does not wither and whatever he does he prospers." In Joshua it says in chapter 1 verses 8 and 9, "This book of the law shall not depart from your mouth, you shall meditate on it day and night so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it, for then you will make your way prosperous." You will have success.

It performs something else, it gives us hope. Psalm 119:147, "I have hope in Thy Word."

And that is not an exhaustive list. The Word performs. It does work in us. Just to be reminded, it saves us, blesses us, teaches us, rebukes us, corrects us, perfects and equips us, guides us, counsels us, revives us, makes us fruitful, grows us up, warns us, rewards us, nourishes us, prospers us, gives us hope. The psalmist may have well summarized it all in the magnificent words of Psalm 19 in which he says, "The law of the Lord is perfect, restoring the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart. The commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever. The judgments of the Lord are true, they produce comprehensive righteousness."

It is a people to be glad for who receive the Word which performs in them all these things. Listen to me, the words of human beings no matter how astute they are, no matter how brilliant they are, no matter how educated they are, no matter how wise they are, no matter how eloquently they might be

expressed cannot produce these results. Only God's Word can. It performs in those who believe. And that was the essential reality in the Thessalonian's life. Their spiritual progress was a result of their reception of the Word of God. Those who accept the Word as God's Word, those who believe what it says and appropriate it to their lives will experience its on-going transforming power. Where there is no believing, there is no power.

So, Paul is so glad, so thankful for their reception of the Word which always works...it always works. Listen to Colossians 1, "You heard the Word of truth," he says, the gospel, then listen to verse 6, Colossians 1, "which has come to you just as in all the world so is constantly bearing fruit and increasing...listen to this...even as it has been doing in you also since the day you heard and understood the grace of God in truth." Since the moment you heard and understood the Word began to work and it will always work in the believer.

Sometimes it has to do mostly with a purging cleansing work, but it's always at work. It is a truism axiomatic about a believer, that the work in his life is being continually carried on by the Spirit and the Word. It can never fail to do that.

The Thessalonians were exposed to the Word. They received it. They accepted it in their hearts. And it went to work and Paul thanks God for what they were becoming because of the power of the Word.

And then he introduces but briefly and by suggestion a second cause for his gladness. Not only their reception of the Word but their honor of the saints. And in verse 14 he says, "For you, brethren, became imitators," and just that word threw me back to chapter 1 verse 6. There he also says you became imitators of us, Paul, Timothy and Silas, and of the Lord whom they had come to know through Paul, Timothy and Silas. Here he adds that they had become imitators of other believers, namely those in the churches of God and Christ Jesus in Judea. We cannot assume that they had any occasion to meet those saints in Judea. We can assume that Paul must have given them some input as to the kind of life those saints in Judea lived.

I can imagine if I were in Paul's situation going to a pagan/Gentile city, going to a Jewish synagogue to evangelize Jews and then going out into the streets to evangelize Gentiles, that I would want to give them some kind of a model of what a church was, that I would want to instruct them on some of the life patterns of noble saints that they could learn from so I could make the assumption that Paul probably told them about other Christians. Probably told them about the founding of the church in Jerusalem, probably told them that with the martyrdom of Stephen the Jerusalem church was scattered and that it was scattered, it reidentified itself in other places all around Judea then gave birth to daughter churches. And by the time the Thessalonian church was founded there was a sprinkling of little churches throughout Judea and maybe not so little after that. And that those believers in Judea would have been longer in the faith than the brand-new Thessalonians and more

mature by virtue of years of walking in the Spirit and therefore were models for them to follow. There may have been some specific things that Paul told them about those Christians in Judea that they could pattern their own lives after.

But they were a wonderful group of Christians because they imitated Paul, Timothy and Silas, they imitated the Lord, and here he says they even imitated the saints in Judea. And the highest form of honor is imitation, isn't it? You really honor someone when you pattern your life after them. And so that's the second thing that sort of marks the nobility of this little church is that they honored the saints...they honored the saints by patterning their lives after them. "For you, brethren," and the word "for" is an indicator that there's an added confirmation of their positive reception of the Word. They received the Word and the confirmation of that is what it did in their life to make them imitators of other mature believers. They were mimicking the believers in Judea as they had mimicked Paul, Timothy and Silas and attempted even to mimic the Lord. They paid the highest honor by imitation. The greatest respect...they had respect for Christ, they wanted to imitate Him. They had respect for the preachers, they wanted to imitate them. They had respect for the rest, they were willing to imitate them.

Now in some ways their imitation of the Judean saints was less than deliberate as Paul goes on to point out as we shall discuss in just a moment. But I want to just hasten to add, the fact that these dear Christians were eager to imitate, shows the strength of their spiritual commitment. They didn't just come to receive the Word of God and then say, "Well, I'm glad I'm saved from hell and I'm on my merry way, doing whatever I want." They were thrust immediately into a complete new transformed existence with all new models of virtue to pattern their lives after. They had a longing in their heart to be like Christ, a longing in their heart to be like the preachers who had brought them the gospel, a longing in their heart to be like the other mature saints. That's the mark of regeneration. That's the evidence of their true acceptation of the Word of God. The strength of their spiritual commitment was shown in the desire that they had to follow those who were their superiors spiritually. These new believers then were imitators.

Now would you just note "the churches of God in Christ Jesus" is a very interesting little phrase. Just to point out to you, plural "churches" there is one church in the sense that we are all one in Christ, but the Scripture is very clear too that there are local assemblies identified as individual churches. And there were then churches scattered around Judea, notice he calls them "churches of God." Assemblies, gathering togethers of which God was the source. God's gospel, God's church, God's churches, they belong to Him. He's their sovereign electing saving sanctifying source and you can study the New Testament and you will find the term "church" used in general for THE church and you will find it used in specific for local assemblies, such as 1 Corinthians 1:2; 2 Corinthians 1:1; etc. But in all cases, please notice, it is the churches of God in Christ Jesus. All true believers are in Christ. Back to chapter 1 verse 1, "In God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ." Galatians 1:22, "The churches of Judea which were in Christ, in union with the living Christ." And these churches to whom

he refers were in Judea.

Judea is the land of Palestine. Judea, where Jerusalem exists, the holy land. Where the church was born and begun. Actually it was seven years before a church was planted outside of that area. So there were a number of local churches throughout Judea and they were mature. They had been in the Lord longer. And Paul found these Thessalonian Christians patterning their life after them. It may have been in part that he had told the church about them and used them as a model, but there was also a less deliberate patterning in the fact that the church in Judea was persecuted and Paul makes that his main emphasis here as we shall see in point number three.

Paul's third point is this, I'm glad for the Thessalonians because of their reception of the Word. I'm glad for the Thessalonians because of their honor of the saints by imitation. Now, thirdly, I'm glad for the Thessalonians because of their perseverance in suffering. Here is the third characteristic of a people to be glad for. One, they believed the right thing. Two, they follow the right patterns. Three, they stand against the opposition. Boy, that is a marvelous summation. I don't know what else could be said in summary fashion.

The Judean churches had had it very difficult. The original church in Jerusalem was persecuted. With the stoning of Stephen, as I said, these churches were scattered. They were then persecuted and the leader of the persecution against those Judean churches was a man named...what?...Saul, none other than the Apostle Paul. And in Acts 9:31 it says, "Finally when Paul got converted, the churches had some peace." He was leading the persecution. When he was converted it kind of waned a little bit but it didn't take very long for it to get generated again and Paul himself, by the time he comes back to Jerusalem in Acts 21, falls in to the persecution. The one who was once the persecutor becomes the persecuted.

So the Judean churches had been through a lot of persecution, hostility and had set a pattern which now the Thessalonians were following. Marvelous. Here was this new little baby church handling opposition, suffering, persecution in the same way the churches in Judea had handled it. Look what he says in verse 14, "For you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews." Just like the Judean church was persecuted by the Jews, you have endured the same kind of suffering that they endured.

This little church in Thessalonica was a church to be glad for because they persevered in suffering. And where their imitation of the Judean Christians really comes through is in the way they responded to the persecution. And may I hasten to add? You don't have to be long in the faith to be spiritual. Spirituality is an absolute. A person saved one second can be spiritual if they walk in the Spirit and obey God. A person saved 50 years can be fleshy and carnal. You don't have to be mature in the faith to be spiritual. Maturity is a process, spirituality is an absolute. Here was a church in Thessalonica brand new in Christ but dealing with persecution the same as an older mature church

because they too were walking in obedience to the Spirit of God and the Word of God.

So he commends them thirdly for their perseverance in suffering. They weren't the first to suffer. That's why he says, "You also endured the same suffering." Somebody else set the pattern for how to handle it, you're following them. The churches in Judea had already suffered and faithfully endured, held on and become patterns for imitation.

Please notice that they were enduring the same kind of suffering which means the same kind of persecution, animosity and hatred toward Christ and the gospel and so forth. They were enduring the same kind only at the hands of your own countrymen. Who would that be? Who in Thessalonica was doing it?

Go back to Acts 17 for a moment, very, very clear. In Acts 17 verse 4, "Some were persuaded and believed," what happened? Verse 5, "In Thessalonica the Jews becoming jealous and taking along some wicked men from the marketplace." The Jews went into the marketplace and got some hired goons, some riff-raff. They hired them. They formed a mob and set the city in an uproar. So it was Jews and hired Gentiles that went out after the church. They went to the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the people because the church was meeting there. They didn't find them, began dragging Jason and other brethren before the authorities, "These men who have upset the world have come here also and Jason has welcomed them and they all act contrary to the decrees of Caesar saying there's another king, Jesus." The Jews, of course, were trying to get the Roman government to see Christians as political insurrectionists and punish them on that basis. But it was the Jews there in Thessalonica who incited the Gentiles, got some people to stir up a mob, an uproar, to come against the church.

We can assume that after that, of course, Paul and his friends left. We can assume in the weeks that passed before he wrote this letter back from Corinth to them that during that time that hostility had escalated. During that time it had probably accumulated more Gentile animosity and, of course, we know that they were accusing Paul of being nothing but a fake and a phony and a charlatan and a fraud, a false teacher, one who wanted sexual favors, money, possessions, power, prestige that's why he writes chapter 2 verses 1 to 12 to answer that.

But this little church had endured all of that. They had endured the persecution. And Paul saw it as an evidence of their real Christianity. They had counted the cost. They willingly entered the narrow gate to walk the narrow way. They paid the price. They took up the cross and followed Christ.

How can you tell a true church? By the way they received the Word, by the way they honor the saints and imitate them and by the way they endure the difficulties. This is a people to be glad for...a people to be glad for. Can you contrast them with the Jews? Look at verse 15.

How did they receive the Word? They killed the Lord Jesus. They killed the prophets. And they drove us out. There's the contrast. The Thessalonians received the Word. The Jews so violently and vehemently and vociferously rejected the Word that they murdered the preachers, including the Son of God.

Secondly, the Thessalonians honored the saints. The Jews hindered the saints. They are not pleasing to God, verse 16 says, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved. Here the Thessalonian church held the preachers up and said "We want to pattern our lives after you." The Jews tried to hinder the preachers from evangelizing anybody.

Thirdly, the Thessalonians endured suffering with perseverance. They persevered in suffering. Look at verse 16 regarding the Jews. "They fill up the measure of their sins and wrath has come upon them to the utmost." They will perish in suffering. They will be punished by eternal suffering. What a contrast. A people to be glad for, as over against a people to be sad for. And what makes the story of the Jews so sad is the same thing that makes the story of Cain so tragic and the story of Judas so tragic, and that is proximity to truth and spiritual opportunities. The whole thought of enduring suffering like the Thessalonians did and following the pattern of those churches in Judea catapults Paul into the contrast which contrast will take us next week to a very moving and a very powerful look at a people to be sad for. Let's bow together in closing prayer.

Father, as we have come to see Your truth in this passage we are reminded again of what is so basic to our understanding and that is there's a dividing line down through human history that divides men and women into two categories, the saved and the lost, the blessed and the cursed, the rewarded and the punished. Those who shall live forever, those who shall die forever. Father, we pray that we might ever thankful, as was Paul, for a church that has received the Word, honored the saints and persevered in suffering. Thank You for letting us be brothers and sisters with the Thessalonians and with all other believers who have so stood. Thank You, Father, that we can be part of a people for rejoicing and not be a part of a people for sorrow. God, may we be all that You want us to be. May we increase in our receptivity to the Word. May we increase in our devotion to imitate the saints. May we increase in our commitment to endure and persevere in suffering that we might be a church to gladden Your heart for Jesus sake. Amen.

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