

1 Thessalonians 2:14-16

PREFACE

In Christendom there are two words—"believe" and "faith"—that are so common, so ubiquitous, as to be rendered almost meaningless in our minds. One can believe without having faith, but one cannot have faith without believing. Faith is belief put to the test: For example, I may *believe* that old wooden bridge will hold my weight, but I do not have *faith* until I actually walk across it. Which then brings up the issue: In what do you have faith? Many people have faith—but faith in what? Evolution? Man-made global warming? Aroma therapy? Faith itself tells us that placing our trust in God and His Son Jesus Christ is not just a fanciful, faddish belief system, but—like God's word itself—something supernatural, powerful, life-changing.

How easy it would have been for the eleven remaining disciples/apostles, after the death of Christ, to just give up, declare the previous three years to have been just a noble experiment that failed, and return to their old life.

- But *faith* told them they were not just dreaming when the risen Christ appeared to them.
- *Faith* told them it was not just a mystical apparition when Jesus ascended into heaven before them.
- *Faith* told them that the pouring out of the Holy Spirit on them on the Day of Pentecost, and the resulting supernatural ability for them to speak in languages not their own, was not because they were drunk.
- Most of all, it was their *faith* that sustained them through the trials and persecution that followed.

Faith in Christ Jesus is far more than just a belief-system—more than simply philosophical assent. It is a way of life; it is, like God's written word, something real and strong and foundational.

v14

Verse 13, from our previous study sets up v14.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13-14.

In v13 we have both of these God-given forces working together: It was the *faith* of the Thessalonians that told them that the word delivered by Paul was not his, but literally God's. And both of these—their faith and the word—worked together to sustain them through the many trials to come.

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea,

How? How were they "imitators" of the churches in Judea? Two ways:

- First, they imitated the **operational faith** of these earlier churches. As with the original apostles, one does not endure persecution without faith. Absent faith, the typical response is, *Hey, I don't need this*, and one quickly deserts the cause. As we have already seen, the Thessalonians' operational faith was put into practice immediately, in imitation of Paul and the Lord Jesus.
 - **Read 1 Thessalonians 1:6-7.**

for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews,

- Second, they imitated the Judean churches by **enduring the sufferings** that came as a result of their obedience to Christ.
 - The Thessalonians suffered “at the hands of” their own countrymen—but the *instigators* were the same as in Judea: the Jews.
 - **Read Acts 17:5-8.**
 - This follows, for it was the Jews who had more to lose by this new faith in Christ. What did the pagan idolaters or unreligious care that another “god” had been added to the pantheon? But the Jews believed in the *one* God, and, from their perspective, this Messiah was in direct competition for their members. To the pantheists, one could believe in Christ—and anyone else. But to the Jews, one could not follow Christ and be a good Jew. In addition, Paul’s ministry always began at the synagogue, so, as they saw it, he was intentionally stealing his converts from their members.
 - **Read Acts 17:1-2.**
 - The Jews also took issue with the Christian missionaries for not requiring their converts to become Jews first. That is, many Jews who were not outright enemies of The Way, saw it as simply another Jewish sect, requiring one to be a Jew first.

w15-16

Some commentators take the position that vv15-16 are so harsh and condemnatory of the Jews—so seemingly out of character for Paul, so “un-Pauline”—that they were surely added later (i.e., by someone else). But there is no evidence for this. Nonetheless, as James Denney points out,

There is nothing in his epistles elsewhere that can be compared with this passionate outburst.

Read 1 Thessalonians 2:15-16.

In these two verses Paul directs a number of accusations against the Jews:

- They killed the Lord Jesus
- They killed the prophets
- Persecuted/expelled Paul and his fellow missionaries
- They do not please God
- They are antagonistic to all men
- Hindering missionary efforts toward the Gentiles

He concludes that as a result of all this,

- Their cup of transgressions against God is overflowing
- So that God’s wrath against them is already—and in the final day—overflowing

who both killed the Lord Jesus...

Heading the list is the worst offense: they killed Jesus. Of course, they did not drive the spikes or hang him from the cross. But the Romans would not have done any of it—the arrest, the trial, the torture and execution—without the instigation of the Jewish leaders.

And although the politically correct today get into a lather whenever anyone accuses the Jews of killing Jesus, this was certainly the position of the early apostles. For example, on the road to Emmaus—

Read Luke 24:19-20.

—and in Peter’s first sermon after the coming of the Holy Spirit.

Read Acts 2:22-23.

We say (as I do in *Reflections this week*) that King Herod “built” the great temple that stood in the time of Jesus; even though no doubt he expended not one drop of sweat doing the actual work, he was certainly *responsible* for the building of the structure. Just so, as the disciples on the road to Emmaus and Peter said, the Jews killed Jesus not because they drove the spikes through His flesh, but because they were *responsible* for it occurring.

and the prophets

And Jesus Himself confirms that the Jews killed the many prophets sent to them by God to speak for Him. In Matthew 23, just after His eight woes pronounced against the scribes and Pharisees, He said,

“Jerusalem, Jerusalem, who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, the way a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were unwilling.” (Matthew 23:37)

and drove us out.

That had happened before, but most recently in Philippi, Thessalonica and Berea.

They are not pleasing to God but hostile to all men

We need not detail the centuries of disobedience and rebellion by the Jews, their rejection of Yahweh’s laws and idolatry. But consider just this immediate context with Christ.

Robert L. Thomas: By opposing God’s Messiah so strenuously, they became God’s adversaries. This could not help but produce hostility to all men—a hostility arising not from a supposed racial superiority, but one manifested in stubborn resistance to admitting Jesus’ messiahship.

hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved

By working so hard to deny the spread of the gospel, they were denying men and women the salvation and joy that could be found through Christ. Hostile indeed!

with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins.

I want to be careful here and be precise with my words. Paul is speaking here about **Jews that were actively hostile to the Christian faith**. As such they were liable for the full extent of God’s response to sin. They had no savior. The word translated “fill up,” or “heap up” [*anaplerosai*], “points to a well-defined limit of sin appointed by divine decree.” To put it in the vernacular, it is God saying, *That’s it! I’ve had it with you*. The last straw in the Jews’ long history of rebellion and disobedience was their rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. With that, their cup of sin was filled to overflowing. Listen to how James Denney describes this.

James Denney: The cup of their iniquity was filling all the time. Every generation did something to raise the level within. The men who bade Amos begone, and eat his bread at home, raised it a little; the men who sought Hosea's life in the sanctuary raised it further; so did those who put Jeremiah in the dungeon, and those who murdered Zechariah between the temple and the altar. When Jesus was nailed to the cross, the cup was full to the brim. When those whom He left behind to be His witnesses, and to preach repentance and remission of sins to all men, beginning at Jerusalem, were expelled or put to death, it ran over. God could bear no more.

Even though this is directed toward unregenerate Jews, we dare not pass by this without making application to ourselves—but *carefully; as [our ex-pastor] counseled me this week, "Trying to apply a passage regarding unbelieving Jews of Paul's day to believers in our day is fraught with difficulty. Navigate those waters carefully!"* The apostle Paul mentions this in his instruction for the ordinance of Communion.

Read 1 Corinthians 11:28-30.

Some in the Corinthian church had even died—i.e., the Lord had taken them home—because of their irreverent behavior around His table. Now let's read what the apostle John had to say about this in the context of our prayers for each other.

Turn please to 1 John 5:16-17.

If anyone sees his brother committing a sin **not** leading to death, he shall ask and God will for him give life to those who commit sin **not** leading to death. There **is** a sin leading to death; I do not say that he should make request for this [*i.e., there is no point praying for this; it is in God's hands*]. All unrighteousness is sin, and there **is** a sin **not** leading to death. (1 John 5:16-17; emphasis added)

As David Guzik puts it,

Apparently, a believer can sin to the point where God believes it is just best to bring them home, probably because they have in some way compromised their testimony so significantly that they should just come on home to God.

Remember that the word used in our text for "**fill up** the measure of their sins" means "a well-defined limit of sin *appointed by divine decree*." Here is what sends a chill down my spine: God knows that limit, but we don't.

But wrath has come upon them to the utmost [lit., to the end].

Now, this verse closes with the consequence for the hostile, unregenerate Jews. They have already qualified for ("has come") the full force of God's wrath in the final Day of His Judgment. [The verb is an example of the "now—not yet" tense we became familiar with in our study of Christ in the OT. The Jews have suffered, and are suffering some of this wrath, but the actual, full-force "wrath" will not occur until the final Day of Judgment.]

While we *can* experience His discipline, it is true that this same wrath of God need not be feared by the Christian. Nevertheless, are some of us "filling up the measure of our sins" to the point where the expression of God's patience toward us on earth is running out, and He must remove us from everything we hold dear on this temporal plane?