

# THE MODEL CHURCH: A STRONG PEOPLE 1 THESSALONIANS 02:13–20

## *Introduction*

A strong church is a church of strong people, a people who have trusted Jesus Christ as their Saviour and Lord and who are continuing steadfast in Him. This passage covers the traits of a strong people.

- I. They received the Word of God as the Word of God (v. 13).
- II. They became followers of strong churches: stood fast despite severe persecution (v. 14).
- III. They escaped the Jews' guilt (vv. 15-16).
- IV. They possessed a strong fellowship (vv. 17-18).
- V. They were destined to bring glory and joy (vv. 19-20).

## **I. 1 Thessalonians 02:13 *Receiving the Word of God***

A strong people receive the Word of God as the Word of God. Note three facts.

1. The Thessalonian believers had received the Word through the preaching and teaching of men. Paul, Silas and Timothy had carried and proclaimed the Word of God to them. They or some other believer had to take the Word to the Thessalonians, for there was no other way they could have received it. It takes people to communicate the Word of God. If believers did not speak and share the Word, then it would never be heard or received. It would stop dead in its tracks and no one would ever again be reached for Christ. There would never again be a branch added to the tree of life. The only way the Word of God can go forth is for believers to share it. The point is this: proclaiming and bearing witness to the Word of God is God's *ordained way* to reach the world for Christ. He has ordained the mission of proclaiming it *to men*, not to angels nor to any other creature. The duty to proclaim and bear testimony to the Word of God lies in the lap of believers. For this reason, we must proclaim and bear witness to God's Word every day of our lives. The very life of every soul upon earth rests in our hands. Paul knew this; that is the reason he had carried the Word of God to the Thessalonians.
2. The Thessalonian believers had received the Word not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, *the Word of God*. What a phenomenal statement! Paul unequivocally declares that the Word he proclaimed was not the word of men, but the Word of God Himself. He further adds "but as it actually is, the word of God." Do you and I believe that the Word of God is the Word of God?

=> The Thessalonians believed it.

=> Paul believed it.

=> But do you and I believe it? Really believe it?

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Remember: what Paul preached was the Old Testament Scriptures and the mysteries of Christ which God had revealed directly to him (cp. Rom. 16:25-26; 1 Cor. 2:7; Eph. 1:9; 3:4, 9; Col. 1:27; 2:2; 4:3; 2 Tim. 3:16). Most people — by far most — do not believe that the Word of God (the Bible) is the Word of God. They receive the Word of God only as the word of men.

- => They think that the Word of God is only of men.
- => Some think that the New Testament is only what the early apostles and believers could remember about Christ and conclude from His teaching.
- => Some think that the Old Testament is only the religious book and religious fables of the Jews, written by their great religious leaders.
- => Some think that the Bible is the great religious book chosen by God to use in the lives of people when it is proclaimed. Sitting on the shelf, they say that the Bible is not the Word of God, but when it is read or proclaimed, it becomes the Word of God; God uses its message to move upon the hearts of people and convict them.

However, note a critical point, a point so critical that it can be the determining factor that affects a man's eternal destiny: both the Bible and Paul claim that the Word of God is not the word of men, but the Word of God. "*It actually is, the Word of God.*" And the Thessalonian church and its believers received it as the *Word of God*. (See *Word of God*, 1 Th. 2:13.)

3. The Thessalonian believers received the Word so that it could work and operate in their lives. The verse says that it is God who *is at work in you who believe*. But what is it that we believe? The Word of God. If we do not believe the Word of God, there is nothing left to believe but the word of men. And the best that men can give us is messages and words that stir us to greater...

- self-improvement      • morality      • self-development
- justice      • self-image      • equality
- works      • commitment      • goodness

All of this is good, but it has one terrible flaw: it ends. Everything about man ends when man dies. The messages and words of men can do no more than what man can do, and man can do no more than die and continue in his terrible separation from life and God. Man cannot save himself. This is the reason man must hope and trust that God is love and has loved us enough to speak to us — speak accurately and clearly. If God cares no more than to leave us in the dark about how to become acceptable to Him, then we never want to have to face Him. Why? Because He could not be a God of love — not if He has left us in a dark, evil and destructive world — left us groping and grasping to find our way to Him. A God of love would love and speak to us clearly and accurately, without any error, so that we could unmistakably know Him, ourselves and the world:

=> who we are

=> why we are here

=> why things are the way they are

=> where we are going

This is the glorious gospel: God has loved us and has given us His Word, the very Word of God itself, the Holy Scriptures. Some of the Thessalonians believed in the Word of God. Therefore, God worked in their hearts and lives, converting and growing them to be more and more like His dear Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

**Mat 13:16** “*But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear.*”

**Mat 13:23** “*But the one who received the seed that fell on good soil is the man who hears the word and understands it. He produces a crop, yielding a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.*”

**Luke 8:15** “*But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*”

**Acts 2:41** *Those who accepted his message were baptised, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.*

**Acts 17:11** *Now the Bereans were of more noble character than the Thessalonians, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every day to see if what Paul said was true.*

**1 Th 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.*

## 1 THESSALONIANS 02:13 WORD OF GOD

*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. 1 Thessalonians 02: 13*

The Bible claims to be the Word of God (See 2 Tim. 3:16; *The Bible*, 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

=> The *unity of Scripture* indicates an origin that could come only from one mind, God’s mind (see *The Bible*, 2 Pet. 1:19-21).

=> Scripture has changed millions of lives for God.

=> Fulfilled prophecy and archaeology substantiate a divine origin. (See *Genealogy of Jesus*, Lk. 3:23-38).

In fact, the unique feature of the Bible is that it has always been *exhaustively substantiated* to be the Word of God by any approach of investigation that is *serious and honest*. But note: both *seriousness and honesty* are necessary for the truth to

be received. No less evidence could be expected from the mind and providence of God. For God can speak only the truth, and any pure investigation of truth can only substantiate His Word. But in saying this, it is necessary to recall that faith is an element in substantiating anything. Therefore, in accepting the Bible as the Word of God, faith is involved; it is one of the elements required.

However, the supreme authority for accepting the Bible as the Word of God is Jesus Christ. If we believe in the divine mission of Christ and His apostles, then we must believe that the Bible is the Word of God (Jn. 5:39).

That Jesus Christ was a historical person is fact.

=> That Jesus Christ *claims* to be the Son of God is fact.

=> That Jesus Christ *is* the Son of God is faith.

That the Bible is an historical book is fact.

=> That the Bible *claims* to be the Word of God is fact.

=> That the Bible *is* the Word of God is faith.

*1 Cor 2:12-13 We have not received the spirit of the world but the Spirit who is from God, that we may understand what God has freely given us. This is what we speak, not in words taught us by human wisdom but in words taught by the Spirit, expressing spiritual truths in spiritual words.*

*1 Th 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.*

*2 Tim 2:15 Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.*

*2 Tim 3:16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.*

*Heb 1:1 In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways.*

*1 Pet 1:11 Trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories that would follow.*

*2 Pet 1:20-21 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.*

*2 Pet 3:2 I want you to recall the words spoken in the past by the holy prophets and the command given by our Lord and Saviour through your apostles.*

**Rev 1:1** *The revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave him to show his servants what must soon take place. He made it known by sending his angel to his servant John.*

**Rev 14:13** *Then I heard a voice from heaven say, "Write: Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on." "Yes," says the Spirit, "they will rest from their labour, for their deeds will follow them." □*

## II. **1 Thessalonians 02:14** *Following Strong Churches*

Strong people become followers of strong churches. They stand fast in Christ despite trials, even when facing severe persecution. Note that it was their own countrymen who were persecuting them, both Jew and Gentile, but the instigators were the Jews.

**Acts 17:5** *But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.*

This is exactly what was happening with the Judean churches. It was their own countrymen who were persecuting them. Therefore, Paul was able to say to the Thessalonian believers that they were following the great example of the Judean churches: they were standing firm for Christ even as the Judean churches were.

**Thought 1.** Note two lessons.

- 1) Nothing cuts and threatens us like the opposition from those who are closest to us: our family, friends, neighbours and countrymen. When those whom we love the most oppose us, the temptation to give in is strongest. But we must never give in, for our eternal destiny is at stake. We must continue on with Christ, trusting Him to take care of us and to win many of our persecutors to Christ through the testimony of our steadfastness.

This was what the Judean believers did, and it was what the Thessalonian believers did. It must also be what we do: stand fast for Christ no matter what opposition may confront us.

- 2) One of the strongest helps when facing persecution is to look to the example of others who have stood strong against opposition. This is what the Thessalonian believers did: they followed the example of the Judean churches. The faithfulness of both the Judean and Thessalonian believers stands as a strong example for us.

**Mat 10:16-18** *"I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard against men; they will hand you over to the local councils and flog you in their synagogues. On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles."*

**John 15:20** *Remember the words I spoke to you: 'No servant is greater than his master. If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also. If they obeyed my teaching, they will obey yours also.'*



**John 16:23** *In that day you will no longer ask me anything. I tell you the truth, my Father will give you whatever you ask in my name.*”

**Phil 1:29** *For it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe on him, but also to suffer for him.*

**2 Tim 3:12** *In fact, everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.*

### III. **1 Thessalonians 02:15–16** *Sins of Jews, Persecution*

A strong church escapes the guilt of the Jews. This may seem like a strange way to word this point, but what is in mind is this.

=> A person either stands in support of Christ or in opposition to Christ.

=> A church either stands in support of Christ or in opposition to Christ.

The Jewish persecutors stood in opposition to Christ, in opposition to God’s very own Son. And remember: they were religionists, a body of religious people who were set on destroying the Christian church in the name of religion. But the Thessalonian church and its believers stood in support of Christ; therefore, they escaped whatever guilt hangs over a person’s head for opposing God’s Son. The Thessalonian believers were free of the terrible sins and guilt that the Jews had committed in the name of religion. What were the sins and guilt of the Jews? Paul lists them, and the indictment is one of the most terrible ever drawn up against man.

1. They killed the Lord Jesus. Note the title “Lord.” They thought they were killing only a man, only a carpenter from Nazareth, but they were actually killing the Lord. By Lord is meant all that is included in the title: the Lord God, the One who came *out of heaven* itself, the very Son of God Himself. The terrible guilt is clearly seen:

=> the guilt of killing a person.

=> the guilt of killing the Lord Himself.

2. They killed their own prophets. This was a charge that has often been levelled at the Jews.

**Mat 23:31** *“So you testify against yourselves that you are the descendants of those who murdered the prophets.”*

**Acts 7:52** *Was there ever a prophet your fathers did not persecute? They even killed those who predicted the coming of the Righteous One. And now you have betrayed and murdered him.*

3. They persecuted Christian believers. They not only rejected the gospel, but they wanted to destroy the message and those who followed and proclaimed it. They did not want anyone following Christ.

**Acts 4:1-3** *The priests and the captain of the temple guard and the Sadducees came up to Peter and John while they were speaking to the people. They were greatly*

*disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead. They seized Peter and John, and because it was evening, they put them in jail until the next day.*

*Acts 11:19* Now those who had been scattered by the persecution in connection with Stephen travelled as far as Phoenicia, Cyprus and Antioch, telling the message only to Jews.

*Acts 17:5* But the Jews were jealous; so they rounded up some bad characters from the marketplace, formed a mob and started a riot in the city. They rushed to Jason's house in search of Paul and Silas in order to bring them out to the crowd.

4. They did not please God. No person can please God if he stands in opposition to Christ. The only way a person can please God is to surrender his life to Christ — to give all he is and has to Christ. The Jews were not about to do this. Nothing was going to break them away from their own religious ceremonies and ideas about religion.
5. They were contrary to all men. They opposed and hated anyone who did not believe as they did. They should have loved those who differed, but instead they bitterly despised them. This is the difference between Christianity and Judaism and so many other religions. We who believe do claim that Christ and the Holy Scriptures are the truth, but we do not hate and oppose those who differ with us. We love them and do all we can to reach out and help them. We help to meet the needs of every man, even if he goes to his grave never accepting Christ. We love him; therefore, we want him to know the truth. But if he rejects Christ, we do not cast him off. We will continue to help him any way we can — in love.
6. They tried to stamp out the Word of God lest some person be saved. Just imagine trying to stop God's Word. How in the world can a man stop the Word of God? The answer is self-evident. Even a world of men could not stop God's Word. This is the foolishness of men, and it was the foolishness of the Jews.
7. Now, note the results of the sins of the Jews. First, they filled up their sin; — they heaped up their sins to the limit; their sin became full and overflowed and kept on overflowing. What a terrible indictment. The idea is that they sinned so much that they reached the point of no return. Returning to God was impossible (Leon Morris. *The Epistles of Paul to the Thessalonians*. "Tyndale New Testament Commentaries," p. 57).  
Second, the wrath of God is come upon the Jews to the uttermost. The idea is that the judgment of God upon the Jews was certain, for they had...
  - killed His Son, the Lord Jesus.
  - persecuted His church followers.
  - tried to stamp out His Word so that other people might not be saved.
  - killed His prophets.
  - stood against all men.

Think for a moment: if Jesus Christ is truly God's Son, then the judgment of God upon the Jewish unbelievers is inevitable. In fact, His judgment upon any person

or people who stands in opposition to Christ in inevitable. No man shall be able to escape His judgment.

**John 3:36** *“Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him.”*

**Rom 1:18** *The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of men who suppress the truth by their wickedness.*

**Rom 2:8** *But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath and anger.*

**Eph 5:6** *Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of such things God’s wrath comes on those who are disobedient.*

**1 Th 2:16** *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.*

**2 Th 1:7-9** *And give relief to you who are troubled, and to us as well. This will happen when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire with his powerful angels. He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus. They will be punished with everlasting destruction and shut out from the presence of the Lord and from the majesty of his power.*

#### **IV. 1 Thessalonians 02:17–18 Church Fellowship**

A strong church possesses a strong fellowship. The fellowship of the Thessalonians was so strong that Paul just longed to return to them. Remember: he had been forced to flee the city because his life was being threatened by the persecution that had risen against the gospel. The ache of Paul’s heart for the Thessalonians and their fellowship is seen in his emphasis:

=> he had been taken from them in person, but “not in thought. “

=> he “intensely longed” (spoudazo) to return: eagerly sought to return; made a serious, concentrated effort to return.

=> he “abundantly” or exceedingly sought to return.

=> he sought to return “with every effort”: with zeal, with intense longing, with strong passion.

Just imagine a fellowship of believers so strong that such effort is exerted by Paul to be present with them. What a fellowship they must have had — even in the face of persecution.

However, note: Paul’s return to the Thessalonian believers had been hindered by Satan. The word “hindered” means to cut in a road; to make a road impassable (A.T. Robertson. *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. 4, p. 24). It means to put up a roadblock for



the purpose of stopping an expedition (William Barclay. *The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians*, p. 225). When a church is as strong as the Thessalonian church, Satan is bound to do all he can to weaken it and stop its growth. One of the primary ways to weaken a church is to attack the minister of the church. This was his strategy in Thessalonica. What was the roadblock that Satan threw against Paul?

=> Was it some illness? (2 Cor. 12:7; Gal. 4:13).

=> Was it some serious problem in Corinth where Paul was ministering — some serious problem that had been stirred up by Satan to keep Paul there and to prevent his return to Thessalonica? Remember; Corinth was full of carnal believers, prime prospects for Satan's attack (1 Th. 3:1).

Just what the hindrance was is not known. But the point to note is the strength of the believers' fellowship in Thessalonica — a fellowship so strong that Paul longed to return and share in it with the believers.

*1 Th 2:8 We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us.*

*1 Pet 1:22 Now that you have purified yourselves by obeying the truth so that you have sincere love for your brothers, love one another deeply, from the heart.*

### 1 THESSALONIANS 02: 18 SATAN, PAUL'S VIEW OF SATAN

*For we wanted to come to you — certainly I, Paul, did, again and again — but Satan stopped us. **1 Thessalonians 02:18***

Paul never downplayed the work and activity of Satan. He recognized the existence and activity of some terrible *force of evil* — some terrible *supernatural spirit of evil* — some terrible person in the spiritual world who is revealed in Scripture as Satan or the devil. Paul saw Satan...

- as the tempter who tempts men (1 Th. 3:5).
- as the “evil one” (Greek, 2 Th. 3:3).
- as the god of this age (2 Cor. 4:4),
- as the ruler of the kingdom of the air (Eph. 2:2). □

### V. *1 Thessalonians 02:19–20 Witnessing*

A strong church is destined to bring glory and joy. To whom? To the believers...

- who founded the church.
- who reached the believers for the Lord.
- who ministered and taught the church.
- who carried on the work of the church.

Paul clearly says that the Thessalonian believers were his hope and joy and crown. When? In the day when the Lord Jesus Christ will return and they will all stand in His presence.

=> What a hope! The return of the Lord Jesus Christ.

=> What a joy! Joining the Lord Jesus Christ with all the believers whom we have known, reached, and grown in Christ down here on earth.

=> What a crown! To offer to Christ all the dear people we have *had a part* in reaching and growing for the Lord.

Note the word “crown” (stephanos). It is the victor’s crown, the crown worn by the athlete after he has won the contest. The picture is that we are in a contest, a spiritual struggle against Satan for the souls of men. Therefore, we must strain and struggle and fight for the souls of men. A crown awaits us, a crown that we will miss unless there are souls to present to Christ.

**Thought 1.** Have you ever won a soul to Christ? A single soul? How many?

=> Ten souls?

=> Twenty souls?

=> Fifty souls?

=> One hundred souls?

The crown in which we will glory awaits the person who will be able to present souls to the Lord in that day. Let us all ask God to touch our hearts and help us to win souls for Him. He will if we will only ask in sincerity.

**Mat 4:19** “Come, follow me,” Jesus said, “and I will make you fishers of men.”

**Luke 15:6-7** “And goes home. Then he calls his friends and neighbours together and says, ‘Rejoice with me; I have found my lost sheep.’ I tell you that in the same way there will be more rejoicing in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who do not need to repent.”

**John 1:41** The first thing Andrew did was to find his brother Simon and tell him, “We have found the Messiah” (that is, the Christ).

**John 1:45** Philip found Nathanael and told him, “We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote — Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.”

**John 4:36** “Even now the reaper draws his wages, even now he harvests the crop for eternal life, so that the sower and the reaper may be glad together.”

**Acts 15:3** The church sent them on their way, and as they travelled through Phoenicia and Samaria, they told how the Gentiles had been converted. This news made all the brothers very glad.

**1 Cor 9:19-20** Though I am free and belong to no man, I make myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew, to win the Jews.

*To those under the law I became like one under the law (though I myself am not under the law), so as to win those under the law.*

**1 Th 2:19-20** *For what is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you? Indeed, you are our glory and joy.*

**Heb 12:2** *Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

**James 5:20** *Remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.*

**Jude 1:23** *Snatch others from the fire and save them; to others show mercy, mixed with fear — hating even the clothing stained by corrupted flesh. ■*