

# 1 THESSALONIANS 2:13-20

## “RECEIVING THE WORD”

There’s a new term floating around today... “open source religion.” Recently, the LA Times did a story on it called, “Divine Inspiration From the Masses.” The phrase, “open source,” comes from the computer world. “Open source programming” occurs when online volunteers add code to developing software. The prevailing program ends up a collaborative effort that continues to evolve as it gets debugged and cleaner code gets written. The *Linux Operating System* is an example... Wikipedia – the online, *everyone contributes*, encyclopedia is another... *Open Source* is based on the idea, *the group collectively is smarter than its smartest individuals*.

Well, “open source religion” applies the same approach to faith. Rather than make one person – *namely God* - the source of all our beliefs, and morals, and guidance – religion becomes a collaborative effort. Everyone voices their own opinion. Instead of “Thus says the Lord” - truth is the result of dialogue, and online refinement, and revision, and self-correction. The ultimate authority ends up the consensus of the group.

This is *Wikipedia* applied to religion – it’s an “*everyone’s religion*.” It’s a faith that you can edit, and make your own contribution. Nobody ends up with a monopoly on the truth. The only truth is what everybody accepts as true – and that alters whenever the public consensus changes. All of a sudden, *the crowd* - aka, *the mob* - knows more about life than God. In short, “open source religion” replaces *the Bible with the blog*.

Welcome to our scary new world! *Open source religion* is an example of the expression, “We’re so open minded that our brains have leaked out.” Real truth isn’t derived from *open sources*, but *One source*. So what if you have *lots of sources* that are all wrong. We need a *higher source*. It’s sheer arrogance to think that *anyone one of us* – or *all of us* combined are smarter than God. *We’re not even smarter than a 5<sup>th</sup> Grader*. Even the brightest folks do stupid stuff. I’ll never forget my professor at GSU – *a brilliant guy, a genius - he showed up for class on the wrong night!* I knew it would be a long semester... And do you really think lots of smart people combined always get it right? Ever been to a University of Florida game? *Here’s 90,000 college folk cheering for the wrong team!*

If human beings have proven anything over the short span of our history it’s the propensity for self-deception. We’re gullible, arrogant, error-prone. This is why Proverbs 9:10 says, “The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding.” The one stop for ultimate truth - in life and in faith – is not *man’s reason*, but *God’s revelation*. Truth is found in God’s *unerring, unchanging, undeniable Word*.

Unlike the open source thinkers today, this is what the Thessalonian believers realized. Paul remembers how they received the Word of God... This is where we pick it up, verse 13... “For this reason we also thank God without ceasing, because when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you welcomed it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which also effectively works in you who believe.” The Thessalonians knew that the good news of Jesus - and the Book that reports it - isn’t just a volume in the library, or a selection on Amazon. The Bible isn’t just “*the word of men*” – “*it is in truth the Word of God.*”

What if we heard a whistling in the air. We looked up and saw a bolder barreling through the sky at breakneck speed, heading straight toward us. This huge meteorite hits the roof and pounds a crater in the floor. As the smoke clears we gather around to gaze at the glowing cosmic rock - when someone notices a metallic envelope attached. We quickly open it, and find a letter signed, "*Love, God!*" Its a message from God to us! We'd be thrilled! We'd read it, study it, give it all our time and attention. And that's exactly how the Thessalonians treated the Bible. They had discovered a message *from God*. They gave it their utmost diligence.

Remember Paul had spent just three weeks in Thessalonica before his enemies ran him out of town. How many Bible Studies can you hold in 21 days? In a short time, Paul had planted a growing, vibrant, healthy church! *How does that happen?* There's only one explanation – the power of God's Word. Take note, **the Word works!** It's probing, penetrating, and potent. The Word of God has the power to transform a person's life. As Paul writes in verse 13, it "*effectively works in you who believe.*"

Even the Bible's enemies and skeptics have recognized its power! French skeptic, Rousseau, once admitted, "*The majesty of the Scriptures astonish me. The holiness of the evangelists speak to my heart and have such striking characteristics of truth, and it is... so perfectly unparalleled, that if it had been the invention of men, the inventors would be greater than the greatest heroes.*" He knew the Bible is of divine origin.

Yet despite the Bible's supernatural source and strength, it's impact still depends on its reception. How we receive the Word becomes crucial. Receiving the Word of God is like catching a football... If the pass is a little *high* you have to go up in the air to make the catch... If it's *long* you have to speed up... If it's *low* you have to dive... You have to make the catch with your feet in bounds, and maintain control to prove possession... And you'll be covered by a defender... He'll try to knock you off stride at the line of scrimmage... He'll interfere with your vision... *He'll do all he can to force an incomplete pass!* And this is what the devil does. He too, plies his schemes to keep you from receiving the Word.

In fact, your pastor can be the greatest quarterback in the league. He can sit in the pocket under pressure and zip the Word with pinpoint accuracy... He can scramble when he's in trouble... read the defense and find who's open... *But it's all in vain if the receiver doesn't make the catch.* As with the Thessalonians, it's every believer's job to receive the Word. Dive low if necessary, and humble yourself... make a leap of faith if that's what's required... when you grab the ball brace yourself for the jarring hit you know is coming... you've got to bring it in. For if you don't receive the Word even the prettiest spiraling sermon ends up incomplete.

And here's what makes a good receiver of the Word... **faith!** Paul says "*the word of God... effectively works in you who believe.*" ... *who believe!* Eugene Peterson talks about his habit of running long distances. When he got hooked on 10K races he subscribed to several running magazines. Then he pulled a muscle and couldn't run for several months. During that time he never once opened one of the running magazines. It was only after he was healthy enough to run again did he return to his reading...

That's when Peterson noticed a parallel. He writes, "*If I'm not living in active response to God - then reading about His creation, and salvation, and holiness won't hold my interest for long. It's simple obedience that opens up my life to a text more quickly than any number of Bible studies...*"

*Sure hands will catch a ball - but receiving the Word requires a **willing heart** - it takes a determined faith, and a desire to live an obedient life. **Paul threw good passes... but we need to be faithful receivers!***

And because of their proficiency at receiving God's Word Paul says to the Thessalonians in verse 14, **"For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea in Christ Jesus. For you also suffered the same things from your own countrymen, just as they did from the Judeans, who killed both the Lord Jesus and their own prophets..."** I know I may be testing the ladies with the football analogies, but bear with me. We're comparing receiving the Word with catching a football... And here is a classic illustration... When a wide receiver goes up to receive a pass he can expect to be greeted with a vicious tackle. The opponent will try to jar the ball loose – *and Satan uses the same tactics.*

This is what happened to the churches in Judea – when they received the Word they sustained a terrible hit – it was a helmet to helmet blow. The Jews did to the believers, what they had done to Jesus and the prophets. The persecution was physical, and painful, and violent...

And Paul is using the example of the churches in Judea as a lesson to the Thessalonians. When you receive the Word expect a crunching tackle. So often when persecution rises we think we're a unique case – we're the first person who's every been slighted, or laughed at, or ridiculed for Jesus' sake. Paul assures the Thessalonians that's not the case. The church in Thessalonica had been persecuted a few months, while the churches in Judea had undergone tough persecution for 20 years. When we think we have it bad, remember someone is in worse shape.

You've probably heard the name **"Kyle Maynard."** Several years ago, Kyle was a High School wrestler at Collins Hill High School. What made his accomplishments so impressive is that Kyle has no arms or legs. He crawled across the mat on his nubs and stumps. I was reading an article about Kyle in the AJC. It quoted one of his teammates as saying, **"Everyone has reasons to quit that aren't as good as his reasons to quit. And he doesn't quit."** This is why Paul brings up the churches in Judea. If they're not quitting; then the Thessalonians can't quit.

And this is what the Lord is saying to us - when you think you've got it rough... *Your family rejects you - your spouse mocks your faith - your co-workers ridicule you - your boss rides you unfairly* – remember there are Christians in the world today who've been jailed and tortured for their faith. Think of the Iranian pastor who's been sentenced to death for no other reason that his faith in Jesus. *He's not quitting – you too can stick it out!*

Paul mentions that the Jews in Judea not only persecuted Jesus, but they also **"persecuted us (verse 15); and they do not please God and are contrary to all men, forbidding us to speak to the Gentiles that they may be saved, so as always to fill up the measure of their sins; but wrath has come upon them to the uttermost."** It's not Anti-Semitic to say it – *it's true* – that much of what the Jews have suffered through the ages is a direct result of their rejection of their Messiah - and their hostility toward the early church. Don't misunderstand, when it comes to the cross we're all culpable – the Jews, the Romans, even you and me – for it was my sin, and your sin that drove the nails into Jesus. I'm not alleviating anyone of responsibility. But the Jews who rejected Jesus bear a particular guilt. This is implied in John 1:11, **"He came to His own, and His own did not receive Him."**

The awful cry of the Jews before Pilate still echoes down the halls of history, “Crucify Him, crucify Him...His blood be on us and on our children.” The sacking of Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 AD - the European Inquisitions and the expulsions of the Jews in the Middle Ages – the pogroms in Poland and Russia - the German Holocaust – even the Great Tribulation - *still future* - is part of God’s answer to that infamous request. Paul realized that “*wrath had come upon the Jews to the uttermost...*” God still loves Israel, but their stubbornness has come at a steep price. Here’s a warning... *stubbornness always comes at a steep price!*

Verse 17 turns the attention back to Paul and his pals in Thessalonica. “But we, brethren, having been taken away from you for a short time in presence, not in heart, endeavored more eagerly to see your face with great desire. Therefore we wanted to come to you - even I, Paul, time and again (on multiple occasions Paul wanted to visit) - but Satan hindered us.” I love how Paul expresses his fondness for the Thessalonians. He’d been separated from them “*in presence, but not in heart.*” Paul was a people person. He loved his peeps. Especially these Thessalonians.

Understand, it wasn’t enough to Paul to see these folks *come to faith*, he wanted them to *continue in their faith* – grow stronger in their faith. This is our desire. It’s why we’re launching our “Getting Started Class.” We want everyone who’s new to CC or new to the faith to sink their roots deep – lay a foundation - become a healthy and strong Christian. Now that you’ve received the pass we want you to run with the ball.

This was also Paul’s desire for the Thessalonians. He truly loved these new believers. He wanted to go to them and encourage them face to face. Paul was even planning a visit, but something hindered his trip. And it wasn’t the price of gas - nor did Delta cancel his flight... *it was Satan.*

Notice again, Satan is determined to break up a pass. He doesn’t want anyone to receive God’s Word. He’ll level a jarring hit, or he’ll try to sack the quarterback... And this is what he did to Paul. *He bull rushed him.* The exact method Satan used to “*hinder*” Paul, we’re not sure, but somehow Satan and his demons put up a road block to Paul’s travel plans.

When you read of Paul in the book of Acts, and study his letters, you see how constantly aware he was of the spiritual war raging around him. And I’ve got to admit this challenges me. It’s not my inclination to see the devil or his demons behind every *pothole*, and *banana peel*, and *bee sting*. In fact, I don’t like giving the devil one bit more credit than he deserves. My tendency is to downplay spiritual hindrances – *but not Paul!* Here, Paul interprets a *simple visit* as a *spiritual battle!* “*Satan hindered us.*” The term refers to “*a road so broken up that travel becomes blocked.*”

Make no mistake about it, we have an adversary that wants to stop us from receiving the Word – and sack us when we try to pass on the Word. *Satan can tinker with car engines* to keep you from church – *and cause Sunday sniffles* – *and force alarm clocks to malfunction* – *and lead children into mud puddles...* He can engineer multiple distractions *that’ll stop you from fellowship* - *or from witnessing to a friend* - *or cause you to miss the Men’s Retreat* - *or forget your offering* - *or neglect your morning devotion...* *What we’re tempted to chalk up to coincidence might just be an invisible skirmish in the spiritual realm. Don’t let the enemy block a reception...*

Verse 19, “*For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing?*”

Just last week, the St. Louis Cardinals won the World Series in dramatic fashion. Afterwards the team was awarded “[The Commissioner’s Trophy](#).” If you’re wondering... the trophy the Cardinals recklessly carted around the field, and slobbered all over, is 24” high - it weighs 30 pounds - it features 30 flagpoles and flags (one for each team in the league) - it’s made of sterling silver by Tiffany & Co. – and it costs a whopping \$15,000. And Paul is asking the Thessalonians, if that’s what you get for winning a measly few baseball games, what does he get for 30 years of ministry and a lifetime of faithfully preaching the Gospel? If the Cardinals get the Commissioner’s Trophy - *well then*, what kind of trophy does God give?

Paul asks in verse 19, “[For what is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ at His coming?](#)” *Paul’s reward for all his service to God was the Thessalonians!* The joy Paul will experience when he sees the church he founded and cultivated - caught up in the clouds - standing with the Christ - robed in His righteousness – with praise on their lips - *this will be Paul’s reward!* He says to the church in verse 20, “[For you are our glory and joy.](#)”

Understand, when God motivates people he does so in *three ways*... First, there’s **fear**. Unbelievers need to know there is a hell. Believers need to realize they can forfeit certain blessings. Both groups should fear God’s judgment. Fear is a God-given incentive to live the Christian life. Second, **love** is a motivation. This is the highest, purest incentive. Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “[The love of Christ compels us.](#)” We all should *serve* and *praise* and *give* and *sacrifice* to the Lord because we love Him. But there’s a third incentive – and this is the NT’s most common motivation – it’s **reward**. God provides His kids a carrot. Every parent does this - humans like to get a prize. Get all hyper-spiritual - and call it *mercenary* if you like - but God knows us. He encourages us with rewards.

When a Greek athlete won a competition he was awarded a laurel wreath – a “*crown.*” It was worn as a symbol of victory, a badge of honor. The NT actually mentions five crowns available to a faithful Christian...

**1 Corinthians 9:24** speaks of the “[incorruptible crown.](#)” This goes to a believer who disciplines themselves – both mind and body - to live for God. In **Revelation 2:10** you’ll find “[the crown of life.](#)” It has a dual purpose. It goes to the believer who faithfully endures persecution. And in **James 1:12** the *crown of life* is also given to the believer who resists temptation. **2 Timothy 4:8** mentions a “[crown of righteousness.](#)” It’s awarded to all those who love Jesus’ appearing. *There’s a reward for rapture watchers!* And in **1 Peter 5:4** “[the crown of glory](#)” goes to the faithful pastor.

*Christian effort and discipline – endurance and holiness – a longing to see our Lord Jesus – faithfulness in ministry...* is all stuff that God rewards. But here Paul refers to the Thessalonians as his “[crown of rejoicing.](#)” The folks Paul *led to the Lord* and *nurtured in the Lord* were his reward. In the end, the lives he reached were his greatest joy. His peeps were what put a smile on his face. The Thessalonians were Paul’s World Series Trophy! He wanted to kiss these new believers and carry them around the field. The believers themselves were Paul’s prize.

Before the throne of God every face will be cocked toward Jesus. We’ll be engulfed in His glory! We’ll shower His throne with worship and praise. But I’m certain that at some point, Paul will peek. He’ll look out of the corner of his eye, and see the Thessalonians - *and his heart will take joy!* He’ll know his brief time in Thessalonica had something to do with them being there! These believers are “[his hope, his joy, his crown of rejoicing!](#)”

Imagine, you standing before King Jesus - and the innumerable crowd in heaven - and someone points to you, and shouts, "I want to thank Bill - if it hadn't been for Sue - I wouldn't be here." *What a rush that will be!* Paul's reward in heaven – and our reward - will be the presence of *the Toms and Teds, Bettys and Brendas* - all the folks we influenced for Jesus! It's been said, "The only thing better than going to heaven is taking someone with you, and the only thing worse than going to hell is taking someone with you." Here's today's big question... *Will there be anyone in heaven there because of your witness?* Do you have a *crown of rejoicing?*

Perhaps you've seen the movie, *Mr. Holland's Opus*. It stars Richard Dreyfus. There's a scene in the movie God always uses to speak to me. In the movie Dreyfus plays Glenn Holland - a budding composer. He hopes to write a symphony – become rich and famous through his music. But his musical career doesn't go so well. His dreams don't pan out. Life interrupts his ambitions. Mr. Holland gets married. Money pressures force him to take a teaching position at the High School. *But Glenn Holland is adamant. The job is temporary* – it's just a way to help make ends meet.

At first Mr. Holland comes home every day from school, and labors into the night on his symphony. His teaching job is just a untimely derailment. He'll be back on track soon - but then a mortgage, and then a child, and then the needs of his students increase the weight of his responsibilities. When he and his wife discover their child is deaf a whole new set of challenges are thrust on his shoulders. He puts his composing on the shelf and learns sign language. He puts his family first, and pours into his students. Mr. Holland figures his dream of leaving a musical legacy is over.

At the end of the movie an older, grayer Mr. Holland is fighting the school board. He's no longer a reluctant band teacher. What began as a career detour has become his passion. Mr. Holland is battling the budget cuts that are threatening to shut down the school's music department. He's spent 35 years putting his heart into teaching his students. Sadly, Mr. Holland loses the battle. *Fiscal cuts trump the fine arts.*

The final scene is moving... School is out. Summer has started. Mr. Holland has taught his last class. He returns to his room to gather his personal items. With regret and sorrow he fills his box with nick-knacks. As he exits the school Mr. Holland hears a noise in the auditorium. He swings open the door to find the hall packed with people. A band of former students is on stage playing the music Mr. Holland taught them. A huge banner stretches out above them, "*Goodbye, Mr. Holland.*" Everyone greets their old mentor and colleague with a standing ovation.

After his wife says a few words, the Governor of the State, a former student of Mr. Holland's takes the podium. She recounts how a younger Glenn Holland inspired her, and gave her the confidence that she'd lacked. That's when the Governor speaks on behalf of the hundreds of people in the room. She says, "*Mr. Holland had a profound influence in my life (on a lot of lives, I know), and yet I get the feeling that he considers a great part of his life misspent. Rumor has it he was always working on this symphony of his, and this was going to make him famous and rich. But Mr. Holland isn't rich and he isn't famous. At least not outside our little town. So it might be easy for him to think himself a failure, but he'd be wrong. I think he's achieved a success far beyond riches and fame.*" The governor looks at Mr. Holland, and sweeps her hand over the crowd. She continues, "*Look around you. There is not a life in this room that you have not touched, and each of us is a better person because of you. We are your symphony, Mr. Holland. We are the melodies and the notes of your opus. We are the music of your life.*" *And this speaks to me...*

There have been times in my 31 years of ministry when I've wanted to pastor a bigger church – a mega-church. I'd be lying if I said I didn't. Not for selfish reasons, but a bigger church means more resources and help. In fact, recently, I've been concerned about *attendance figures* and *financial statements*. Over the last few years the economic downturn has forced us to do more with less... Over the last few months we've taken a beating financially. It's been tough. I'm *praying more* and *working harder*... These are the stresses and pressures you don't see.

But here's what I was reminded of as I studied this morning's text... God doesn't give a crown for large churches, or big buildings, or huge budgets, or new carpet, or more workers... When I think of you – folks who have been saved by God's grace and are growing at CC – even the folks who received grace, and grew in grace, and later moved on – *I rejoice!* I realized again that the church isn't about nickels and noses - brick and mortar – it's about the souls of individual people. And in my lifetime I've had the opportunity to influence for Jesus far more people than I deserve.

Even if the day comes when we can no longer pay our bills - or I have to return to my warehouse job - I'll still be rejoice! I'll still wear a crown! As Paul put it, *“For what is my hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you...”* On the day when Jesus returns, and I see you in Jesus' presence – *and I realize I was part of getting you there* - I'm sure that'll be reward enough for me! Again, verse 20, *“For you are our glory and joy.”*

And I hope this is how you measure your success and corral your ambition. If your life is all about the *new house*, or *flashy car*, or *booming entertainment center*, or *your kids winning the Little League game*... you'll be disappointed in the end. God doesn't give rewards for any of the above. Live for material things and you'll have your reward in the here and now. God gives spiritual rewards for our investment in people. The *“crown of rejoicing”* goes to *people who care about people*. If all you care about is stuff you can *count*, or *measure*, or *see with your eyes* you've missed out on life's greatest rewards. My *“crown of rejoicing”* is *my wife's faith*, and *my kids love for Jesus*, and *the servant's heart of the people around me*, and *the spiritual growth of my friends*, and *the salvation of my neighbors*.

When you depart this life don't you want to know you made a difference in the lives of others – that you left behind footprints that lead to Jesus... When the Lord returns, and we gather in heaven, don't you hope there'll be a few people there who'll say you influenced them for Jesus' sake?

Here's what Paul is telling the Thessalonians... *“When I retire to my heavenly home I'd like a retirement gift – but rather than a trophy, or a gold watch, or a nice plaque, or a travel voucher, or a financial bonus – the only reward I want is to see you with me – serving the Lord and loving Jesus.”* And this is my heart toward you and this church... at the end of the day, the reward I really desire is to see you *living and giving your all* for Jesus! That's the reason I want to be diligent each week to pass you the Word. And that's why I hope you humble your heart - and with a willingness to obey - receive the Word. Even if you take a hard hit – hold on to the reception - and let the Word of God work powerfully and effectively in you!