Faith in a Hostile Culture
1 Thessalonians 2:9-16

I've no idea who first said it, but there's that well known expression, 'you are what you eat'. And a mother once brought her 8 month old child to see me because he was bright orange, I mean *bright* orange. And I looked at this little boy and I asked his mother, 'er, what do you give him to eat for breakfast', 'pureed carrots'. And for lunch? 'Pureed carrots'. And for dinner? 'Pureed carrots.' And this boy was a living, crawling, carrot: because you are what you eat!

But the same is true for our hearts. I think most of us would agree that the stuff we read, watch or listen to has an effect on us. You might start reading a certain newspaper because you lean to the left politically and so does it, or you watch a certain news channel because it leans to the right and so do you, but before long what you're reading or watching starts shaping you. And increasingly you think, or see life, or view sex, or whatever, like those you're feeding your mind with see it.

So, whilst some species of chameleon change their skin colour in response to their surroundings, our surroundings, the messages we take in from our surrounding culture, can affect us at a much more profound level than just skin-deep. They affect how we think, and who we are, on the inside.

And that's interesting, because in this passage Paul repeatedly talks about the message he was spreading and the effect it has on those who receive it.

The Good News of God
Look at v9, where Paul reminds the Thessalonians how he and his team 'proclaimed to you the gospel of God.' Now, in Britain, before there were printed newspapers, there were people called Town Criers. And a town crier would go into the town square, and ring his loud hand-bell, and call out 'hear ye, hear ye' and then he'd announce a decision of the government or the council or the king.

And when Paul talks here of proclaiming the gospel, he's using the same words that would have been used of the town criers of his day. To proclaim something was to herald it. It was to announce in public the king's message.

So, it wasn't the herald's message. Sure, the herald, proclaimed it, but he didn't get to decide the content. He couldn't receive the King's message, read it and think, you know what, I think I'll make my own announcement. His only authority, the only reason people would bother listening to him, the only power his words had, came from the fact that this was the king's message he was proclaiming.

Which was why Paul qualifies what it was he was proclaiming: 'we proclaimed to you *the gospel of God*.' In other words, 'Guys, what we preached to you, what we proclaimed to you, wasn't something we'd made up, it was God's gospel, it was the King's message.'

And it was precisely because this was how the Thessalonians received the message that made Paul so thankful: v13, 'And we also thank God constantly for

this, that when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as what it really is, the word of God.'

Now, CS Lewis wrote that "Christianity is a statement which, if false, is of no importance, and if true is of infinite importance. The one thing it cannot be is moderately important.' And Paul is saying that whilst you hear God's word through men, ultimately, it isn't man's word, it's God's. And if that is right, then it is of infinite importance.

You see, if it's just man's word then you can put it alongside all these other influences in your life, all these other things that speak into your life and shape and mold you. But if you see it as God's word, then it takes on a whole new order. And Paul says that's just how these Thessalonian's saw it.

So this was not just an intellectual assent. They didn't just nod agreement at what Paul was saying but it go no further than that. They *heard* it; they *received* it, and they *accepted* it. And the word Paul uses for *accepted* could be used for welcoming someone into your house. So these guys dropped the drawbridge, and opened the gate, and welcomed this message of the gospel into the castle, the home, of their hearts and gave it living space.

Now why did they do that? Because it was good news. You see the word the New Testament writers borrowed for gospel, v9 again, 'the gospel of God' was the word *evangelion*. And when the town crier, the herald, went out and proclaimed *evangelion* from the king, it wasn't 'hear ye, hear ye, the king demands that all of you have to work harder and pay more taxes and fight his battles for him.' When the herald announced *evangelion*, gospel, good news, it was, 'listen everyone, the king's armies have won the battle, the war is over, the king has defeated your enemies.' So, it was never – here's a list of what you must do for the king, but here is what the king has done for you.

And so when Paul says 'we proclaimed the gospel, the good news, of God', it was not a list of all the things the Thessalonians, or you and I need to do for God, it was 'listen, let me tell you all that Jesus, your true king, has done for you.'

And when you receive the good news of Jesus as God's word like that then it begins to take on an authority and a power in your life, and it begins to change you.

You see imagine a carpenter, or a sculptor. And he has this block of wood, and he wants to carve an image, a statue out of this wood. So he takes his hammer and his chisel, and he sets to work. Now, what is it that turns that block of wood into that sculpture? Is it the carpenter, or is it his tools? And the answer is it's both. The carpenter uses his tools and the tools need the one who uses them. And when it comes to moulding our hearts and changing our lives, God's tool is his word spoken into our hearts and our lives. Look at v13: 'you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, *which is at work in you believers*.'

And he uses the present tense there – so this word of God didn't do something in them only in the past, when they first believed. It goes on being a source of divine power in their lives. And what we see here is that when you receive the gospel as God's word and give it that room space in your heart and life, it shapes who you are, what you do and how you respond when life turns bad.

The Gospel and your Character

Now if you're in a court of law, and you want to prove someone innocent or guilty, you need witnesses. And you need those witnesses to agree. And, as we saw last week, Paul knows that in some ways he's standing in court accused of having come to the Thessalonians for his own gain, motivated by those age-old temptations of money, sex and power.

So to defend himself, Paul calls witnesses, and in his day you needed two. And so the first witness Paul calls to vouch for what Paul and his colleagues were really like are the Thessalonian Christians themselves. Verse 9, 'For you remember, brothers….'; v10: 'You are witnesses…'; v11, 'For you know how…'

But if calling them was an obvious move, the second witness he calls is anything but. Because both here, and earlier in chapter 2, the witness Paul calls is God. And in calling God as witness Paul is saying, 'Forget all these accusations coming at me, God knows what we were really like, what was really motivating us'. Verse 4, 'God tests our hearts'; v5 'God is witness', v10, 'You are our witnesses, and God also, how holy, righteous and blameless was our conduct toward you believers.'

Now someone once said that *character* is what you are in the dark. Your character is who you are when no one is looking. Actors talk about being 'in character', don't they? Acting like this person they are portraying would act. But *your* character, the real you, is who you are when the audience has gone, and you come out of character, it's who you are when the stage-lights are turned off.

And Paul says that God knows what he is really like, in the dark. And under his gaze he can say that he and his team were men of integrity, that they were holy and righteous.

But listen, it's only the gospel of Jesus that can do that in you. You see, firstly, if you are honest with yourself, you know that you are not holy and righteous. We don't meet God's standards, and most of the time we don't meet our own. And when we think that we need to save ourselves by reaching that standard it will either make us proud if we reach it, or despairing if we don't, but it will never make us holy. Only grace can do that, because Jesus met those standards for us. He was the one man who was holy and righteous. And he gave himself, the righteous for the unrighteous, to bring us to God.

But it's also knowing that, though he was holy, he became sin for us, that gives us the desire and the power to make the right choices, and the right decisions, for the right motives, whether people are watching us or not.

And I was chatting to a friend this week, and he pointed out to me that the opposites of these temptations of money, sex and power are generosity, love and humility. And each one of those characterises Jesus, and each one was supremely displayed at the cross, as he gave himself and made himself poor that we might become rich, as he loved us who are unlovely, as he humbled himself to lift us up. And when we see what Jesus has done for us, it not only solves the problem of our character – because the one with the perfect character takes our place, it also begins to change our character, as we become more like him.

But just as a river flows out of its source deep in the ground, so what we do inevitably flows out of who we are. And as the word of God changes our character what we do follows.

The Gospel and Your Conduct

So if Paul can say that because of Jesus he and his team were holy and righteous, then what follows is no surprise: 'You are witnesses' v10, 'and God also, how… blameless was our conduct toward you believers.'

And the first area Paul highlights is how they handled money and work. Verse 9, 'For you remember, brothers, our labour and toil: we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you.' Now, we know that elsewhere Paul defends his right to receive financial support for his ministry. And we know from his letter to the Philippians that they were supporting him financially whilst he was here at Thessalonica. But the last thing he wanted was to put an obstacle in the way of people responding to the gospel. So he was prepared to work every hour he could to provide for himself and fund their work in that city.

So Paul would rather be burdened, than be a burden. He would rather carry the extra burden of work and the burden of generosity, if you can call it that, than put a burden on them. And when you know that at the cross Jesus was burdened so that you might be unburdened, that he gave so that you might have, then it does something in your heart. And you won't mind carrying others' burdens, and using your resources so that others can know Jesus for themselves.

But having highlighted how they handled money, he then focuses on how they treated others. Verse 11, 'For you know how, like a father with his children, we exhorted each one of you and encouraged you and charged you.'

So last week, he said he was like a nursing mother and now he's like a father. But what kind of a father? Well, listen to this quote from Aristotle, the Greek Philosopher, and this is one all the dads will go Amen to! 'The father is a kind of god to his children, a full head and shoulders above them, and rightly so, for the father is a king.' I think my girls should read more Aristotle!

And yet it's not the father's authority that Paul's aiming at here, is it? It's his power to encourage and exhort and comfort. It's not that he rules over them with a rod, it's a father's loving devotion for his kids that wants to see them grow up into all that's good, that wants the very best for them, and urges them to pursue that.

But just look at what that 'best' is. Because we can think that the 'best' for our kids would be financial security, or for them to make something of their lives; but as a spiritual father, Paul was looking elsewhere: v10: 'we exhorted… encouraged… and charged you to walk in a manner worthy of God.'

Now you could read that as Paul saying, ok, to be a Christian, here's the list of do's and don'ts. Daily Bible reading is in, but alcohol and dancing are out. But that's not the gospel. As Paul says in v12, it is 'God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory.' So when Paul encourages them to walk worthy of God, he's encouraging them to live as the new citizens of God's kingdom that they are.

I mean, think for a moment about fondues. You move to Switzerland and believe it or not, after a while, you actually begin to enjoy fondues. You enjoy eating melted cheese by the bucket load. How weird is that! But what came first? Did you eat fondue and that was the proof the Control des Habitants needed to let you in? 'Ah, you've proved by eating melted cheese that you're one of us! You can enter the country. Welcome to Switzerland!' No! You move here, you take up residence in your new country and you discover that there is something to this melted cheese thing and you grow to like it and you begin to behave like a Swiss.

And God doesn't call you into his kingdom because you walk worthy of God. You walk worthy of God because you know that by his grace he has called you, even though you should still be on the other side of the border. Living in the spiritual equivalent of France or Germany. And in response to his endless, daily grace, calling you into his kingdom, making you a citizen of his country, you live like a citizen and walk worthy of him.

So Paul and the others don't exert power over them, in a wrong way, they encourage them. So how can you and I be more like that? Instead of being someone who uses people for your own ends, how can you be someone who builds others up and wants the best for them as Paul does here? How can you be someone who knows what really matters in life and encourages others to go for that? You can do it when you know that Jesus has encouraged you like that. When you hear in your heart his daily call to live like that, when you know that he gave up power and influence to give you the power, his daily provision of grace, to help you live worthy and encourage others to do the same.

But finally, if the gospel changes your character and your conduct, it also changes the way you respond when life is hard.

The Gospel and Trouble

Now, how do you know, *really* know, that the word of God is doing something in someone's life – in yours or someone else's? Well, Paul tells us how he knew it for these people: v14, 'For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from our own countrymen as they did from the Jews.'

So the way he knows that the good news of Jesus is doing its work in their lives is because of the way they respond to being persecuted for Jesus.

You see, whether it is the Jews in Jerusalem, or the pagans in Thessalonica, or Islam in Pakistan or atheistic secularism and religious pluralism on campus or in the workplace here in Lausanne, there is a kind of religion that is strident and passionate in its opposition to the gospel.

But when the gospel is at work in your life it changes the way you respond to opposition and suffering. When you know how much God loves you, and the cost of that love at the cross, then it changes what *you* love most. And it won't be your personal security or your money or your reputation, or your comfort, it'll be Christ. And because it changes what you love most, it also changes what you fear most. It won't be the stuff others can say about you or do to you because you're a Christian, that won't be what you fear, it will be God you fear.

And the gospel also changes how you see those who oppose you for being a Christian. When you face criticism at work or on campus for being a Christian, you don't need to respond in kind. You can love your enemy, precisely because you know Christ loved you when you were his enemy. And that kind of love melts the antagonism we feel in our hearts towards others. And it's the gospel that tells you that you don't need to take revenge in this life. You see, Paul lists the sins of those who oppose the gospel and then he says, v16, 'But wrath has come upon them at last.' So you don't need to get your own back, because you know that if they come to a place of repentance then Christ has already taken the wrath they deserve upon himself just as he has taken the wrath you deserve. But if they don't come to repentance, God will see that justice will be done on the last day. So you don't need to take things into your own hands, you don't need to give as good as you get, you can leave room for God's wrath.

But finally, when the word of God works in your heart, you'll find an inner strength when you face suffering, because you know that Christ has suffered for you, and if he loves you that much, you know he will never leave you or forsake you. So you'll find the strength to stand when you most need it.