

## **Flipped: God's Word at Work**

1 Thessalonians 2:9-14

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This last week I stumbled across one of those “make you feel good” nature videos. Have you seen one of those?

Now most nature videos that pop up on my feed are titled things like “unsuspecting water buffalo feeds crocodiles and lions.” I’m not sure why these videos get recommended, but they do. Nature is vicious, and so is YouTube.

Anyway, every now and then someone catches something encouraging on camera and it goes viral.

So in this video a baby elephant had lodged itself a water hole upside down. The only things that are sticking out are four legs and a trunk. And they aren’t happy.

And the mom wasn’t happy either. But try as she might she couldn’t get her calf out. And so all the other elephants run her off because she’s keeping them away from the water hole. And there is this big pride of lions getting their BBQ’s ready for a cookout.

Anyway, this goes on for a while until another herd of elephants shows up. And the matriarch of that herd sees what’s happening and gets to work on this calf. But she’s got no thumbs. And she doesn’t want to poke it with her tusks. So she is trying to wedge her leg beside the calf and pull. But she can’t get good traction and the calf can’t hold on. And she tries again and again. And then she gives up. And the pride of lions is getting excited about their chance to get onto YouTube.

But this matriarch can’t leave. She can’t abandon these fledgling legs. And so she returns one more time and manages to wrap her trunk around one of the waving appendages. And then by wedging her trunk around his leg and her tusk she is at last able to flip him over and he is able to struggle, exhausted, out of the hole.

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Time passes and the scene ends with the mom and calf carrying on like nothing even happened. People say elephants don’t forget. I’m not sure. I’ll tell you the lions hadn’t forgotten. They looked super grumpy in the drive-through at Wendy’s.

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Let’s do some discussion. Go ahead and flip back around to the people you were talking with before. We’ve got 3 minutes to cover the questions on the screen. Go.

- 1.) What is your name?
- 2.) When you fall into Facebook/YouTube what (socially acceptable) things pop up on your feed?
- 3.) When God flips something in your life around how do you know it was Him and not just coincidence?

Go ahead and open your Bible to 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians chapter 2. We are in the second week of our Flipped series where we are looking at how God flips our worlds right-side up.

And what we've seen so far is that the abundant life God offers is a gift of grace. It comes to us from God and is totally disconnected from our deserving it or working for it. So Paul says – chapter 1 verse 4:

We know, dear brothers and sisters, that God loves you and has chosen you to be His own people. (1 Thessalonians 1:4)

So God loves us and chooses us and calls us before we do anything to deserve this. Everyone who receives God's grace a bumbling pile of legs before God flips us.

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But then we saw that everyone who receives God's grace gets transformed by it. In fact this is the evidence we've received God's grace And so Paul says:

We remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Thessalonians 1:3)

So God calls us by His grace, and we receive this by faith, and that faith shows itself to be genuine by the work, labour and endurance that we give ourselves to.

Now all that was last week. Today Paul describes us the first tool God uses, to flip us over. So would you stand with me as we read 1 Thessalonians 2 starting in verse 9. Hear now the word of the Lord.

[Read 1 Thessalonians 2:9-14]

This is the word of the Lord. You can be seated.

So Paul is writing a letter to the young church in Thessalonica. And it's a faithful church full of Jesus followers who are striving and struggling to live lives of faith in the midst of persecution, suffering and a generally upside-down world – a world like ours.

But it's a letter which means we are getting one side of the conversation – it's like standing beside a buddy who is on the phone. We can hear what Paul's saying but we can't always hear the other side of the conversation.

And that's the way it is in the first verses, 9-12, of our text. Here Paul's defending himself against an attack he received that isn't in the text. So he says: "remember how hard we worked in order not to be a burden on you while we were preaching the gospel? Remember that?" And we are like "No, I don't remember that" – that's because this is a letter.

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So Paul sometimes received financial support from people – for example the Philippians provided for him when he was in prison. But his preference was to cover his own expenses while he preached. And he did this by making tents.

And this was the first century equivalent to having your own YouTube channel. So Paul had flexibility. He could work from home or a beach in Thailand – and provide for himself. And this is what he did, except for the Thailand part.

And so when someone accused him of getting rich off the Thessalonians he responded by saying – verse 11 – “Hey, we didn’t accept any financial support from you at all because you guys are our spiritual children.” His point is parents take care of their kids.

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So I was talking to Jared the other day. He and Kennedy are parents of two young, handsome boys – JJ and Thomas. But the sense I got as I spoke with him was that these boys aren’t pulling their weight. They don’t cut the grass; they don’t pay rent. They fill their pants but don’t contribute to the family plan. But that’s the design. Parents change diapers. Children don’t... until later. But that’s an illustration for another day.

The point is that the inequality in this relationship is healthy as it enables parents to lead their children to what is good. And so Paul has the authority to admonish the Thessalonians – verse 12 – “live lives worthy of God, who calls you into His kingdom and glory.”

Life in Jesus’ kingdom surrounded by His glory is the good Paul wants for his children and us. And he wants this so badly he was willing to work for free.

And then in verses 13 and 14 he tells them about the tool God uses that enables us to live worthy of His call.

Now hear this: you can live a life worthy of God. And you can enjoy abundant life now and forever in Jesus’ kingdom surrounded by His glory. You can! So do you want that? Would that be better than hanging out, upside down in the water hole you’re stuck in, surrounded by lions on a cookout? If so then look at verse 13. Paul says:

You received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

Now there are two words that are important for us here today – “received” and “accepted.” And these words are pivotal in understanding how God speaks into our lives in order to lead us into abundant life. God speaks to flip us right side up.

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But as I say this my suspicion is that the idea God speaks feels a bit cliché. Of course “the Word became flesh and moved into the neighbourhood.” Of course the Bible is God’s word. We know “All scripture is God-breathed.”

This is all so familiar it gets lost on us. But Paul is saying a bit more than all this here. Look in your text. Paul’s point is not simply that God speaks, but that He speaks into our exact situations and this is what flips our lives around.

So he starts out saying you “received” the word of God. And this word “received” refers to something objective. It’s the tool God uses. God has spoken His word. And this word has flipped our lives around. God’s word is powerful.

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So I’ve just finished reading through Acts in my devotions and I was blown away again by the authority Jesus conferred upon these simple men. Peter and John don’t have any money, but they hand out new legs to cripples by speaking in Jesus’ name.

And Peter tells Saphira “Listen! The feet of the guys who buried your husband, Ananias, are at the door. And they will carry you out too.” And then she falls down and dies. And Peter gets told not to speak the name of Jesus anymore, and he replies: “Umm, I think I’m going to side with God on this one, not you.”

The Apostles were on beast mode! God enabled them to speak His words directly into some crazy situations. And on top of all that they wrote the New Testament. So Paul tells the Thessalonians “You received the word of God, which you heard from us.” God spoke through the Apostles to the church. That’s awesome!

But it would only be a little awesome if some guys 2000 years ago heard the word of God and that was it. But that’s not where it ends. God is still speaking today and we can hear Him.

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But be a bit weary here. I once heard a hormone influenced young man tell his girlfriend “God told me we are supposed to get married.” And I was like “Umm... I’m pretty sure that’s not how it works.” God doesn’t tell us who to marry.

But this doesn’t mean God doesn’t speak. God speaking is one of the central tenants of Christianity. God isn’t the God of 2000 years ago He is the God of today. And He speaks to His children. And His word flips our world right side up.

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But how do I know when it is God speaking? How do I know what God wants me to do?

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Well, the answer is that His word – verse 12 – will call you into His kingdom and glory.

Here’s what this means practically: God doesn’t care whether you are a mail carrier or a welder, or a pastor for that matter. His word is “Shine My light into whatever situation you end up in.” And He doesn’t have a specific will that you marry Samantha or Sarah, His word is that you live a life of obedience to His glory in every relationship you have. The Bible continually teaches that responding to God’s grace by obediently following Jesus is the path to abundant life. And this is God’s word to us. He’s speaking!

But He’s not just speaking generally, He speaks specifically into your situation just like He spoke to the Thessalonians. You see they didn’t just receive His word objectively, they accepted it as God’s word to them. And God still speaks this way to us today.

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So, have you ever found yourself struggling with something and then the chapter of the Bible you are reading for devotions perfectly lines up with it? Or maybe the sermon at church deals with that exact thing?

Maybe recently you've been wondering if God cares about you or if He's got anything to say to you. And here we are in 1<sup>st</sup> Thessalonians! If this happens it isn't an accident, and it sure isn't because the preacher is brilliant. Trust me, I know him. He's not!

This is God, knowing you better than you know yourself and speaking His word to you. And He does this because He wants to flip your world right side up and get you out of your water hold. God is speaking to you.

So do you want to hear His voice? Is there some upside-down brokenness in your life that is keeping you from experiencing His kingdom and His glory? Do you feel like you aren't really living the life of joy God designed you for and you want to hear God's way out? If yes, then come to Jesus. He is calling you to Himself right now.

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But maybe you've responded to this call already and are still not living in joy. If this is you then the reality is that receiving God's word isn't enough. We don't walk into abundant life just because God calls. We must respond by accepting it as God's word.

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So sometimes when I hear God speak I know exactly what He is saying but I don't want to listen. Sometimes in these situations I complain that God isn't speaking, but the reality is I hear His voice loud and clear, I just don't want to obey. Does any of this resonate with you?

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Here's a scenario: God doesn't care whether you marry Samantha or Sarah, but He does care that you join yourself to someone who loves Him. Paul told the Corinthians:

Don't team up with those who are unbelievers. How can righteousness be a partner with wickedness? How can light live with darkness? What harmony can there be between Christ and the devil? How can a believer be a partner with an unbeliever? (2 Corinthians 6:14-15)

Now the context here isn't specifically marriage, but it certainly applies if you are thinking of getting married. If you are already married there are other texts for that.

But the point is God speaks clearly but we sometimes don't want to listen. We think our way is better than His way. After all "I love her and I'm lonely."

But hear this. God never speaks to steal our joy. His word always gives joy and leads to abundant life. And so, for example the grace behind this passage is that if you love Jesus He is the most important thing in the world to you – or you don't love Him. And so to be tied to someone who doesn't love Jesus is going to tear your heart apart – Jesus says. So God's word is clear, but sometimes we don't want to obey it. And when we disobey we find ourselves not living in the joy He has for us.

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The second thing that sometimes happens to me is that I hear God's word and then take it for granted. So one moment I can be upside-down in a water hole, and then God can speak a word that leads to abundant life and leaves the lions in my life hungry. And in that moment I rejoice in that – I heard the voice of God! But the next moment I'm like that baby elephant carrying on like nothing special has happened.

Have you ever seen God work in your life or heard His voice and the next day forgot all about it? Do you do this too?

Friends, we don't just need to receive God's word, we need to accept it, like the Thessalonians, as God's word to us. So verse 13 says:

You received the word of God, which you heard from us, [and] you accepted it not as a human word, but as it actually is, the word of God (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

The God of the universe is speaking to you. And if you are going to really live you need to accept His word as the word of God. So how do we do this? Paul tells us in verse 14. He says:

For you, brothers and sisters, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own people the same things those churches suffered from the Jews (1 Thessalonians 2:14)

Paul says the Thessalonians didn't just hear God's word, nor did they hear it and then forget about it. Instead they accepted it as God's word and allowed it to transform their lives. They imitated godly people even when it cost something.

Friends, there is effort here. There is struggle. It's not easy to suffer whether that suffering is from persecution or from choosing to walk away from a sinful action or relationship that you like. If you didn't like it you wouldn't be doing it.

But accepting God's word means embracing His call, in obedience, and acting on it. And it's hard. The baby elephant has to struggle out of the water hole. But there's grace even here.

Look how verse 13 starts and ends. Paul says:

And we also thank God... (because you received and accepted God's word) which is indeed at work in you who believe. (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

Notice Paul doesn't say "way to go Thessalonians, you muscled through." He doesn't give them credit. He thanks God and credits their receiving and accepting to God's word being at work in them.

And this is good news. God is invested in your transformation. He won't just walk away when your legs are waving in the air. He will flip you right side up and He will speak His word and call you into His kingdom and glory.

So will you hear God's word and accept it today? Will you let His word do its work in you? Will you receive it and accept it as God's word to you?

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Just two quick things for those who want to receive and accept God's word; to those who want to avoid letting your faith become a lion's lunch:

If you want this, then first, give yourself to God's word in the Bible. If you can't hear God's voice it isn't because He isn't talking. God is always speaking. He's like the radio – if you don't hear Him you need to turn it on and tune in. So decide that you are going to open the Bible every day this week.

Now there are a thousand reading plans out there. There are some awesome apps that can help you do this. If you need one come talk to me. But ultimately if you are going to accept God's word as God's word to you then you need to read the Bible. So take some time in the morning or at night. Or if you're a parent then maybe when you've locked yourself in the bathroom. Whenever it is, make some space in your life to let God's word in.

Second, practice paying attention to when God shows up and speaks. I've told you this before, but I keep a journal of times when I hear God speaking or see Him working in my life. And I do this because I'm forgetful but I want to remember. So write this stuff down, or make a practice of telling someone.

This is what Paul is doing. He says "I thank God that you received and accepted His word." He's telling the Thessalonians that he has seen God at work in their situation and speaking His word into their lives.

So friends, God is speaking. And He is speaking directly to you. So receive His word and accept it as His word to you by giving yourself to being transformed by it.

Let me pray for us: