

2:13 Not as the Word of Men But the Word of God

The Word of God Incarnate in the Words of Men.

Augustine: We may compare the manner in which our own word is made as it were the speech produced by our body, through assuming that speech as a means of displaying itself to human senses, with the assumption of flesh by the Word of God as a means of displaying himself to human senses. Even as our human words are human thoughts not yet not changed into speech, so the Word of God was made flesh, but most assuredly not changed into flesh. Our words become vocalized. So the divine Word becomes flesh by an assumption of the outward form and not by a transformation of one thing into another. He, therefore, who desires to arrive at some sort of likeness—unlike as it must be at many points—of the Word of God, should not regard as final the human word that sounds upon the ear, either in its vocal utterance or in the unspoken thinking of it. The words of every audible language may also be the subject of thought without being vocalized. Poems may be repeated mentally, while the bodily mouth remains silent. Not only the series of syllables but the notes of tunes, material as they are, and addressed to the material sense which we call hearing, may be presented through their material images to the thinking mind which rehearses them all in silence. We must go beyond all this to arrive at the human word which may furnish some small measure of likeness for comprehending, as in an enigma, the Word of God. We speak here not of that word which came to one or another of the prophets, of which it is said that “the word of God grew and multiplied” ¹; or again that “faith comes of hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ” ²; or again: “when you received from us the word of the hearing of God, you received it not as the word of men but as it is in truth, the word of God.” There are numberless instances in the Scriptures where similar statements are made about the word of God, which is scattered in the sounds of many different languages through the hearts and minds of men. But it is called the word of God, therefore, because a divine and not a human doctrine is handed down. On the Trinity 15.11.20.³

Faith Begins Only When God Elects.

Augustine: Is it not apparently the beginning of the Thessalonians’ faith for which this same apostle thanks God, when he says, “Therefore, we also give thanks to God without ceasing, because when you had received the word which you heard from us, you received it not as the word of men, but (as it truly is) the word of God, which works in you, in which you have believed”? Why does he give thanks here to God? Certainly, it would be vain and meaningless if the person to whom he gives thanks for something is not the person who did it. But since this is not vain and meaningless, then certainly God, to whom he gives

thanks for this work, is the one who brought it about that the Thessalonians, when they had received from the apostle the word by hearing it, received it not as the word of men but, as it truly is, as the word of God. Therefore, God works in the hearts of men, by that calling which is according to his purpose and of which we have said much, so that they would not hear the gospel in vain. On the Predestination of the Saints 19.39.4

2:14 For You Suffered the Same Things

The Suffering of All Prophets.

Origen: "But Jesus said unto them, A prophet is not without honor, save in his own country." ⁵ We must inquire whether the expression has the same force when applied universally to every prophet (as if all prophets are dishonored in their own country). Or, it may be the case that because the expression "a prophet" is in the singular, these things were said only about one. If, then, these words are spoken about one person, these things which have been said suffice, if we refer that which was written to the Savior. But if it is a general principle in view, it is not historically true; for Elijah was not dishonored in Tishbeth of Gilead, nor Elisha in Abelmeholah, nor Samuel in Ramathaim, nor Jeremiah in Anathoth. But figuratively interpreted, it is absolutely true; for we must think of Judea as their country and Israel as their kindred and perhaps of the body as the house. ⁶ For all suffered dishonor in Judea from the Israel which is according to the flesh, while they were yet in the body. Thus it is written in the Acts of the Apostles, as Stephen censured the people, "Which of the prophets did not your fathers persecute, who appeared before of the coming of the Righteous One?" ⁷ And Paul says similar things in his first letter to the Thessalonians: "For you brethren became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judaea in Christ Jesus, for you also suffered the same things of your own countrymen even as they did of the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and please not God, and are contrary to all men." Commentary on Matthew 10.18.⁸

The Need to Take Chances.

Chrysostom: Are we worthy, then, so much as even to mention the name of Paul? He had, in addition, the help of grace, yet did not presume that grace eliminated the need to take chances. We, on the other hand, who are destitute of the confidence grace brings, on what basis, tell me, do we expect either to preserve those who are committed to our charge or to gain those who have not come to the fold? We, indeed, are those who have been making a study of self-indulgence, who are searching the world over for ease and

who are unable or rather unwilling to endure the slightest hint of danger. We are as far distant from Paul's wisdom as earth is from heaven. So it is, too, that they who are under us fall so far short of the men of those days. The reason is that the disciples of those days were better than the teachers of the present, isolated as they were in the midst of the populace, tyrants, surrounded by enemies on all sides, and yet not in the slightest degree dragged down or giving up. Hear at least what Paul says to the Philippians 9: "Because to you it has been granted in the behalf of Christ, not only to believe on him but also to suffer in his behalf." And again to the Thessalonians, "For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God which are in Judea." ... And you see them too, all employed in doing good. And so in those days grace worked effectually, and they also lived in good works. Homilies on Ephesians 6.10

Christ as the Model for Faithful Endurance.

Chrysostom: There is something more in the statement "as they also did in Judea." It shows that everywhere they rejoiced when they contended nobly for the faith. Paul says therefore, "that you also suffered the same things." And again, what wonder is it if you receive the same abuse when they dared to do the same things to the Lord himself? Do you see how Paul introduces this truth as containing great consolation? And how constantly he focuses our attention on it. Upon a close examination one may find it in nearly all his letters, how variously, upon all occasions of temptation, Paul brings forward Christ. Observe accordingly, that here also, when accusing the Jews, Paul puts them in mind of the Lord and of the sufferings of the Lord. Well does he know that this is a matter of the greatest consolation. Homilies on 1 Thessalonians 3.11

2:18 But Satan Hindered Us

Hardship Permitted for the Sake of Future Reward.

Chrysostom: You, too, when you are about to perform any duty for God, expect manifold dangers, punishments, and deaths. Don't be surprised or disturbed if such things happen. For it is said, "My Son, if you come to serve the Lord, prepare your soul for temptation." 12 For surely no one choosing to fight, expects to carry off the crown without wounds! And you, therefore, who have decided to wage full combat with the devil, don't think to pursue such a life without danger, expecting luxury instead! God has not pledged to you his recompense and promise for this life. These splendid things await you in the future life! Be glad and rejoice then, if when you have yourself done any good action, you receive evil in return ... inasmuch as your suffering is the source of a higher recompense!... We see Paul in prison, yes, even in

chains, instructing and initiating. He does the very same in a court of justice, in shipwreck, in tempest and in a thousand dangers. You also imitate these saints, and as long as you are able continue in your good works. Although you see the devil thwarting you ten thousand times, never fall back! Perhaps you have lost your wealth in a shipwreck. Remember Paul, carrying God's word, a message far more precious than all material wealth, was traveling to Rome and was wrecked, and sustained innumerable hardships. And this principle he himself signified when he said, "Many times we desired to come to you, but Satan hindered us." And God permitted it, thus revealing more abundantly his power. Homilies on the Statues 1.30.13

The Thorn in the Flesh.

Jerome: Paul, the chosen vessel, chastised his body and brought it into subjection, lest after preaching to others he himself should be found a reprobate. He relates that there was given to him "a thorn in the flesh, a messenger of Satan to buffet him." ¹⁴ And to the Corinthians he writes: "But I am afraid that as the serpent deceived Eve by his cunning, your thoughts will be led astray from a sincere and pure devotion to Christ." ¹⁵ And elsewhere he says, "Any one whom you forgive, I also forgive. What I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, to keep Satan from gaining the advantage over us, for we are not ignorant of his designs." ¹⁶ And again, "No temptation has overtaken you that is not common to man, but God is faithful, and he will not let you be tempted beyond your strength; but with the temptation will also provide the way of escape, that you may be able to endure it." ¹⁷ And "Let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall." ¹⁸ And to the Galatians, "You were running well; who hindered you from obeying the truth?" ¹⁹ And elsewhere: "We greatly desired to have come unto you, I Paul once and again; and Satan hindered us." Against Jovinian 2.3.20

2:19 Our Hope or Joy or Crown

The Basis of Paul's Zeal.

Athanasius: For we ought to walk by the standard of the saints and the fathers, and imitate them, and to be sure that if we depart from them we put ourselves also out of their fellowship. Whom then do they wish you to imitate? The one who hesitated, and while wishing to follow, delayed the decision and took counsel because of his family? ²¹ Or blessed Paul, who, the moment the stewardship was entrusted to him, "did not immediately consult with flesh and blood"? For although he said, "I am not worthy to be called an apostle," ²² yet, knowing what he had received and fully aware of the giver, he wrote, "For woe

is me if I do not preach the gospel.”²³ But, as it was “woe to me” if he did not preach, so, in teaching and preaching the gospel, he had his converts as his joy and crown. This explains why the saint was zealous to preach as far as Illyricum and did not shrink from proceeding to Rome²⁴ or even going as far as the Spains,²⁵ in order that the more he labored, he might receive so much the greater reward for his labor. He boasted then that he had fought the good fight and was confident that he should receive the great crown.²⁶ Letters to Dracontius 49.4.²⁷

The Well-Being of the Neighbor Our True Crown.

Chrysostom: He who will not seek in the well-being of his neighbor his own benefit will not attain to the crown for this reason: God himself has so decided that human beings should be mutually bound together. When one awakens a sleeping child and asks him to follow his brother, left to himself he is often unwilling. If, however, we place in his brother’s hand an object the child desires, he will pursue his brother to obtain what he desires. It is the same case here. God has placed our benefit in the hand of our neighbor so that we will pursue one another and not be torn apart.

If you wish, apply this illustration to the one who addresses you today. For my benefit depends on you, as yours does on me. Thus, on the one hand, it is to your profit to be taught the things that please God, for these things have been entrusted to me that you might receive them from me and therefore might be compelled to run to me. On the other hand, it is to my benefit that you should be made better: for the reward which I shall receive for this will be great. This again, however, lies in you; and therefore am I compelled to follow after you that you may improve and that I may profit from your improvement. And so also Paul says, “For what is my hope? Are not you that?” And again, “My hope and my joy, and the crown of my rejoicing.” Homilies on First Corinthians 33.3.²⁸

The True Pastor’s Only Defense.

Gregory of Nazianzus: What then is my defense? If it be false, you must convict me. But if true, you on behalf of whom and in whose presence I speak, must bear witness to it. For you are my defense, my witnesses and my crown of rejoicing, if I also may venture to boast myself a little in the apostle’s language. This flock was, when it was small and poor, as far as appearances went, no, not even a flock, but only a trace and relic of a flock, without order, shepherd or boundaries, with neither the right to pasture nor the defense of a sheepfold. Instead, you were wandering upon the mountains, in caves and dens of the earth, scattered and dispersed hither and yon as each one could find shelter or pasture or could gratefully secure its own safety.... Such then was the condition of this flock. Now it is so healthy and well grown that if it is

not yet perfect, it is advancing toward perfection by constant growth, and I prophesy that it will advance.
Orations 42.2, 6.³⁶

3:1 When We Could Bear It No Longer

God Permits Hardship.

Chrysostom: “Therefore when we could bear it no longer, we were willing to be left at Athens alone. And Paul sent two of those who ministered to him,” both to announce his coming and to make them more eager.... Do you see how God permits trials, and by them stirs up and awakens the disciples and makes them more energetic? Then let us not sink down under trials: for he himself will “also make the way of escape, that we may be able to bear them.” ¹ Nothing so makes friends and rivets them so firmly as affliction; nothing so fastens and joins the souls of believers; nothing is so timely for us teachers in order that the things said by us may be heard. For when the hearer is living an easy life, listless and indolent, those who try to teach him only annoy him. But when he is in affliction and distress, he longs to hear his teachers. For when he is distressed in his soul, he seeks comfort from all directions in his affliction. And the preaching brings no small comfort. Homilies on the Acts of the Apostles 42.2

3:2 We Sent Timothy

3:3 Moved by These Afflictions

Fear for the Leader.

Chrysostom: What, then, does Paul say here? The teachers’ trials trouble their disciples. Paul had fallen into many tribulations. He himself also says, that “Satan hindered us.” ⁴ Paul adds immediately “both once” and “and again I would have come to you” and was not able, words that prove the depth of his struggle. And it was reasonable that this should trouble them, for they are not so much troubled at their own trials as at those of their teachers. Neither is the soldier so much troubled at his own struggles as when he sees his general wounded. Homilies on 1 Thessalonians 3.5

Be Cheered by My Suffering.

Chrysostom: “Therefore I ask that you not be discouraged by my tribulations for you, which are your glory.” ⁶ How are Paul’s tribulations “for them”? How are they “their glory”? It is because God so loved

them that he gave even the Son for them and afflicted his servants for them. Paul was in prison so that they might attain so many blessings. Surely this comes from God's exceeding love toward them. It illustrates what God also says concerning the prophets, "I have slain them by the word of my mouth." ⁷ But why were they fainting through another's affliction? He means they were troubled and distressed. Paul says the same things when writing to the Thessalonians: "that no one be moved by these afflictions." For we should rejoice in afflictions rather than grieve in them. If you find consolation in being warned beforehand, we tell you that here we have tribulation. And why you ask? Because the Lord has ordered it so. Homilies on Ephesians 7.⁸

No Giving In to Persecutors.

Severian of Gabala: Paul does not say that no one should occasionally grow weak with weariness but rather that no one should "stoop down" or bow to persecutors. Pauline Commentary from the Greek Church.¹⁰

3:4 *We Told You Beforehand*

Expecting Affliction.

Chrysostom: You shouldn't be troubled, Paul says, for nothing strange, nothing contrary to expectation is happening. These words were sufficient to encourage them. Christ spoke to his disciples in the same way and for the same reason. For hear him saying, "Now I have told you before it came to pass, that when it has come to pass you may believe." ¹¹ For greatly indeed, greatly does it tend to the comfort of others to have heard from their teachers what is to happen. It is the same for those who are sick. If their physicians explain what is happening and what to expect, their anxiety is dramatically reduced. But if anything happens unexpectedly, as though beyond the physician's ability and knowledge, the patient is afflicted and troubled. It is much the same here. Paul knew beforehand and lets them know in advance that "we are about to be afflicted," "as it came to pass, and you know." He not only says that this came to pass but that he foretold many things, and they occurred as he predicted. "For we are appointed to these things." Hence, you shouldn't be troubled and disturbed about the past, nor even about the future. If any troubling thing should happen, "we are appointed for this very thing." Homilies on 1 Thessalonians 3.¹²

3:8 For Now We Live

You Are Our Life.

Chrysostom: Let us imagine a person occupying a place of honor in a king's court. He possesses vast wealth, great power, a birthplace excelling others, distinguished ancestors and the admiration of all people. Examine the matter. Is not this person more of a slave than all others? And let us compare him to not merely a slave but a slave's slave—for many servants have slaves.... But our circumstances are different. If one fares poorly, there are many to grieve with him. Should he obtain distinction, many to find pleasure with him. Not so with the apostle Paul. "For if one member suffers, all the members suffer; or if one member is honored, all the members rejoice." ¹⁴ Paul's words of admonition vary with the situation. "What is my hope or joy? Are not you it?" At another, "Now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord"; at another, "Out of much affliction and anguish of heart I wrote unto you"; and "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is offended, and I burn not?" ¹⁵ Homilies on Matthew 58.4–5.¹⁶

His Students Are Everything.

Chrysostom: The attitude of a teacher should be such as to regard his disciples as everything. "Now we live," Paul says, "if you stand fast in the Lord." And again, "What is our hope, or joy, or crown of rejoicing? Is it not even you in the presence of our Lord Jesus Christ?" ¹⁷ You see Paul's concern in this matter, his regard for the good of his disciples, not less than for his own. For teachers ought to surpass natural parents, to be more zealous than they. And it is right for their children to show deep affection for them. For he says, "Obey those that rule over you, and submit yourselves; for they watch for your souls as they that must give account." ¹⁸ Homilies on Second Timothy 2.¹⁹

Together Let Us Be on Guard.

Augustine: This is why I am admonishing your graces and urging you in the Lord to think lightly, my brothers and sisters, of things present, which you can't carry with you when you die. Be on your guard against sin, on your guard against injustice of all sorts, on your guard against worldly appetites and greed. It is only then, you see, that our profit from you is undiminished and our reward full of joy in the Lord. I mean, we say what has to be said. We preach what has to be preached and absolve ourselves of our debt to the Lord in the Lord's sight. We haven't kept quiet about what we fear, and haven't kept quiet about what we love. So the sword of the Lord's vengeance, upon whomever it may fall, cannot blame the sentinel for failing at his post. Still, we don't want our reward to be assured with all of you being lost, but

with all of you being found. The apostle Paul too was sure of his reward, and yet what did he say to the people? “Now we live, if you stand fast in the Lord.” Sermons 359.9.20

3:10 *What is Lacking in Your Faith*

The Truth of Faith Pastorally Taught.

Augustine: But every discourse on this topic, where one’s goal is that what is said may not only be believed but also understood and known, is burdensome for those still spiritually immature. These the apostle says are carnal, needing to be nourished with milk, as they do not have the strength to perceive such things and are more easily frustrated than fed. Because of this it happens that spiritual men do not in all circumstances refuse to discuss these things with the carnal, on account of the Catholic faith, which must be preached to all. Yet, having the desire to transmit some degree of truth to understandings not capable of a secure grasp, they take care to transmit these in a way that does not cause their discourse to be regarded with disdain and the truth contained therein to be completely ignored. Thus, in order to continue to nourish them despite their immaturity, [the apostle], writing to the Colossians, says, “Even if I am absent in body, in spirit I am with you, rejoicing and beholding your order and that which is lacking to your faith in Christ.”²¹ And to the Thessalonians, “Night and day,” he says, “more abundantly praying that we may see your face and may supply the things that are lacking to your faith.” Tractates on John 98.5.1.²²

An Enrichment, Not an Addition.

Augustine: Let the admonition of the most blessed apostle not depart from your hearts, “If anyone preaches to you a gospel besides that which you have received, let him be anathema.”²³ He did not say “more than you received” but “besides that which you have received.” For if he said the former, he himself would be prejudging himself, who desired to come to the Thessalonians that he might supply what things were lacking to their faith. But he who supplies adds to what was smaller, he does not take away what was there. But he who goes beyond the rule of faith does not go forward in the way but goes back to the way. Tractates on John 98.7.4.²⁴

3:11 *Our God and Father and Our Lord Jesus*

Their Work Is One.

Ambrose: Again, this is said that you may know that the Father is, and the Son is, and that the work of the Father and the Son is one. Note the saying of the apostle, “Now may God himself, and our Father, and our Lord Jesus Christ direct our way to you.” Both Father and Son are named, but there is unity of direction, because there is unity of power. So also in another place we read, “Now may our Lord himself, Jesus Christ, and God and our Father, who has loved us, and given us eternal consolation, and good hope in grace, console and strengthen your hearts.”²⁵ How perfect a unity it is that the apostle presents to us, insomuch that the fountain of consolation is one fountain, not many. Let doubt be silenced, then, or if it will not be overcome by reason, let the thought of our Lord’s gracious kindness incline it in the right direction. Of the Christian Faith 2.10.87.²⁶

Their Grace Is One.

Athanasius: For one and the same grace is from the Father in the Son, as the light of the sun and the sun’s radiance is one, and as the sun’s illumination is effected through the radiance. So too when Paul prays for the Thessalonians, in saying, “Now God himself our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ, may he direct our way to you,” he has guarded the unity of the Father and of the Son. For he has not said, “May they direct,” as if a double grace were given from two sources ... but “May he direct,” to show that the Father gives grace through the Son—at which these irreligious ones will not blush, though they well might. Discourses Against the Arians 3.25.11.²⁷

3:12 *Increase and Abound in Love*

The Unrestrained Overflowing of Love.

Chrysostom: This is a proof of superabundant love, that he not only prays for them by himself but even inserts his prayer in his epistles. Paul’s prayers demonstrate a fervent soul unable to restrain his love. The mention of his prayers also proves that Paul and Silvanus’s failure to visit them was not voluntary nor the result of indolence. It is as though Paul said: May God himself shorten the trials that constantly distract us, so that we may come directly to you. “And the Lord make you to increase and abound.” Do you see the unrestrained madness of love that is shown by these words? Homilies on 1 Thessalonians 4.²⁸

Always His Love for Us First.

Augustine: Suppose we first loved him so as to merit his love in return. Then wouldn't we first choose him so as to merit our being chosen by him? But he who is Truth itself says otherwise and openly contradicts such human vanity by declaring, "You have not chosen me." ²⁹ Consequently, if it is not you who have chosen, then it is certainly not you who have loved; for how could they choose him whom they did not love? "But it is I," he says, "who have chosen you." And how could they possibly fail to choose him afterward or fail to prefer him to all the goods of this world? It was because they were chosen that they chose him. They were not chosen because they had chosen him. There would be no merit in men's choosing him unless the action of God's grace in choosing them had gone before. That is why in imparting his blessing to the Thessalonians the apostle Paul declares, "And may the Lord make you to increase and abound in charity toward one another and toward all men." He who gave this blessing to love one another is the same who gave us the love to love one another. Grace and Free Will 38.³⁰