



## THE WORD OF THE LIVING GOD

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1 Thess 2:9-16

Third Message

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I have already told you that when I was buying a watch a couple of years ago I was amazed at what was being offered. I saw wrist watches that chime, tell barometric pressure, check blood pressure, and play video games; some are even mini computers. I would not be surprised to find that one day, watches will be available that don't even do what they were designed to do in the first place—tell what time it is.

As I survey the Christian scene today I think that much of what passes for ministry is like that: all the embellishments are there, but the heart of the thing is missing. We need to get back to the basics. Any good coach will tell you that is the name of the game. We tend to forget the fundamentals, because we are either too busy, we think we know them already, or we assume that our compulsions are mandates from God. Our calendars are filled with appointments; our days consumed with engagements and projects. But when we stop and evaluate what we are doing, we have to question the significance of our activities.

The apostle Paul did not have that problem. He knew exactly what he was doing, and he believed that what he was doing was absolutely worthwhile.

In his defense of his Thessalonian ministry to his critics, Paul gives a model for an effective ministry. Here we find the fixed points around which everything else revolves. The apostle's life and ministry (and the life of Jesus as well) can be summed up in two observations: he was with people, and he taught them. He befriended others, and he imparted truth. Ministering effectively, therefore, involves growing in these two respects: building relationships, and understanding and communicating the Scriptures. These are the two areas which Paul talks about in the second chapter of 1 Thessalonians. Verses 1-8, which we will look at last week, deals with our relationships; and verses 9-16, which we will look at today, focus on our message.

In our ever-changing world, one thing remains unchangeable, and that is the word of the Living God. Its message never changes. It is always up to date. The Bible is a solid rock founded amidst the shifting sands of the earth. In our relativistic and subjective world, however, the notion of a decisive and final word from God sounds preposterous. Discovery, dialogue and debate are in vogue. Oftentimes when we share a word from the Scriptures, we hear the reply, "Well, that's fine for you. But it doesn't have anything to do with me." What we will see in this passage today, however, and

what we must never forget, is that God's word is exactly that—*God's* word.

We live in a world of cosmic deceit, hidden agendas, treacherous motivations, illusions and lies. Behind all of this is Satan, the great deceiver. His objective is to destroy; his strategy to deceive. His shrewd, cruel mind is behind the lies that buffet us all day long, the media barrage that encourages us to "find ourselves" in something or someone other than the living God; to "go for the gusto" but to leave the Savior out. But the word of God gives the lie to all this foolishness.

We begin our study this morning with verse 9 of chapter 2:

**For you recall, brethren, our labor and hardship, how working night and day so as not to be a burden to any of you, we proclaimed to you the gospel of God. You are witnesses, and so is God, how devoutly and uprightly and blamelessly we behaved toward you believers; just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. (1 Thess 2:9-12, NASB)**

Paul thinks of his message in terms of two elements: he both *embodied* the truth, and he *imparted* it. As Chaucer said of his monk in *Canterbury Tales*: "First he wrought, and then he taught." That is where the apostle's authority and credibility derived: he behaved devoutly, uprightly and blamelessly.

"Devout" means holy, to be wholly God's; "upright" means to behave like we ought to behave. Paul is saying that Christians ought to look like men and women ought to look. And we know what that is, because we have truth. Paul says his life was consistent with what we know to be true. He was blameless. He is not claiming sinlessness and perfection. His authority sprang from his attitude toward holiness, his hunger for righteousness, and our progress. That is what gives the Christian authority.

And not only should Christians embody the truth, they should impart it by teaching the word of God. This implies that we spend time in the word to gain knowledge of it. We grow in our apprehension of Biblical truth, and we use it to encourage and exhort others.

And the purpose of it all must be kept in mind. Paul sets it out in verse 12: "so that you may walk in a man-

ner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory." Why do we minister to our spouses? Is it so they will make more money and we can have an easier life? No. God's purpose must override every other purpose in life. We need to help people grow in their likeness of Christ, to become more and more of a visible representation of the invisible Christ. What do we want for our children? To do all the things we couldn't do in the fields of academics and athletics? Do we try to relive our lives through them, or do we want them to grow in their likeness to Jesus Christ?

This is where we get lost. We forget the purpose for which every other purpose exists: it is to create living reminders of Jesus Christ. That is what we need to ask ourselves when we sit down to talk to our mates and our children. Whatever circumstance we find ourselves in, we desire to be successful so that when we leave, they are more and more like Jesus Christ.

Next, Paul goes on to say some very powerful things about his message. Verse 13:

**And for this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received from us the word of God's message, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe. For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. They are not pleasing to God, but hostile to all men, hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved; with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost. (2:13-16)**

Notice Paul's striking statement, "*not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God.*" Our word, says Paul, was not the word of man, but the word of God. What a bold statement of authority! These words are indeed the writings of men. Writing from his own rabbinic background, Paul uses the language, grammar, syntax and vocabulary of men. And yet, he says, "what I wrote on the page is indeed the word of God." The other apostles believed the same thing. Throughout history, God has always communicated through human beings who look, talk and behave just like we do.

I know that for some of you the Scriptures are new. You are new believers or you are in the process of becoming Christians, and you are still trying to figure how all the pieces fit. For you, the notion that God's word is revealed through man's word may be difficult to grasp. You see the words on the front of the book, "Holy Bible," and you wonder what does that mean? The word "bible" is easy to explain, however. It simply means "book." It is the Greek word for book, *biblia*. There is nothing special about the word. Actually, it

means papyrus. There was a city in the ancient world called Biblos, from which papyrus was exported.

"Holy" requires some definition, however. We all have different impressions of what that word means. When we think of someone who is holy, we imagine a man or woman totally different from us, someone other worldly, perhaps someone with a long face and wearing drab clothes. But the word holy means "to be set apart," to be separated for a special purpose. Therefore, the words "Holy Bible" simply mean a book that is set apart, different, unique, unlike any other book.

In what way is the Bible unlike any other book? The words in our translations are English words, and we read them just like we would read the words of any book. We don't read them diagonally or upside down. We expect poetry to sound like poetry, and history to be history. We apply the normal rules of grammar and syntax that we apply to any language. Then how is it different? Its uniqueness is not found in its size, or its age, or in its cultural background. The uniqueness of the Bible lies in the fact that it is God's word! It claims to be God's word given through men, and in particular Jewish men.

Moses was the first of a long list of prophets to whom God spoke. To use the Hebrew idiom, God spoke "mouth to mouth" to Moses—face to face, in direct revelation. From Moses Israel derived what we call the first five books of the Bible. They probably were one book originally, written perhaps on different scrolls: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. When Israel entered Canaan (in the middle of the fifteenth century BC), they had a question on their minds. Moses was about to die, and they wondered how they would know when the next prophet came on the scene. How could they discern God's voice from the multitude of pagan voices in that land? The Canaanites, the Syrians, everyone had their own set of prophets. How would the Israelites discern the voice of God?

God gave them three criteria to help them: 1) The prophet must be a Jew (God would speak through a Jew). 2) God would speak to the prophet directly. His word would not come through divination. 3) The prophet must predict the future with one hundred percent accuracy. In the main, prophets were mostly preachers who proclaimed the will of God. One of the ways to determine whether they were speaking for God, for themselves or some other source was whether or not their predictions came true. So, in every case where the prophets gave a short range prophecy their proclamations could be tested. If their predictions came true, they were a prophet of God. If not, then Moses said not to be afraid or in awe of them.

From that point on Israel had a number of prophets: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Hosea, and other men who communicated the word of God in men's languages. And their predictions authenticated their proclamations. Around the fifth century BC, the process came to

an end. God no longer spoke through prophets. For a period of about 400 years, in terms of any new revelation, God was silent. The Old Testament was there for the reading—it was God’s word for that time—but God did not speak any longer until he spoke in his Son in his final revelation. As the writer of Hebrews begins his letter: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.” That is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Then our Lord passed on his authority to the twelve disciples whom he commissioned as apostles. Remember his words to them on his last night here on earth, from the gospel of John: “All this I have spoken while still with you. But the Counselor, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you.” *“Teach you all things”*: This is the apostolic warrant for their letters. *“Remind you of everything I have said to you”*: This is the apostolic warrant for the writing of the gospels. That is why the apostles remembered with such fine detail the things that Jesus said and did. The Holy Spirit brought it to their memory. Jesus went on to say: “I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth. He will not speak on his own; he will speak only what he hears, and he will tell you what is yet to come.” This covers the predictive element in the writing of the apostles. It is what authenticated them as prophets. They knew what was to come. This was John’s warrant for writing the book of Revelation.

All of this is simply to say that the apostles had the same authority as the Old Testament prophets. When they spoke, they spoke with the authority of God, specifically with the authority of Jesus Christ.

And that is why Paul refers to the gospel here in this chapter of Thessalonians as something that has been “entrusted” to him. He was a steward of the word. “Steward” is the job title of one who manages an estate. A steward could be a housekeeper or butler, someone who brings from the pantry food and wine for his master’s meals. Stewards and stewardesses on airplanes are entrusted with certain commodities they are responsible to dispense. Paul says it is the Christian’s job to enter into the pantry of God himself and bring out the good things of his word on which others can feed. That is my job as a pastor.

Christians have been entrusted with valuable commodities, what Paul calls in Corinthians the “mysteries of God,” that deposit of truth that contains the secrets of life, the truths about life, about God, and about ourselves. Ray Stedman used to call these the “lost secrets of humanity.” How do you deal with guilt in your life? How can you heal a hurting marriage? How can you be reconciled with a brother or sister from whom you are estranged? How can you find meaning and purpose in life? What do you do when your heart is breaking?

Those are the secrets that have been lost. They are mysteries, because they are undiscoverable by observation.

But God has revealed the answers to these mysteries. He revealed them to the apostles, who through the process of illumination and inspiration spoke and wrote about them. They are recorded for us in the Bible, and they are available to be revealed by the Spirit to those who love God. That is how we understand what life is all about. That is how we can face difficult times and not faint. That is how we discover a resource for living when everything else is taken away from us. When it seems there is nothing left to comfort us, there are always the thoughts of God to sustain us.

That is our message. We have no other. Our task is not to debate the gospel, but simply to announce it. God’s word alone is sufficient to cut through the lies that cloud the minds of unbelievers and ruin their lives. Some may defy it, but they know it is true. And frankly, I believe most people have never heard an intelligent presentation of the gospel. If you were to ask them what Christians believe, they would probably answer in terms of certain moral or political stands believers have taken, but they would have little awareness of Jesus and what he has done for them.

And Paul says something else concerning this powerful word. Notice two things about it. First, he says that the word produces change. He declares, in verse 13, that God’s message also *“performs its work in you who believe.”* It works if you believe it. Isaiah uses a different analogy. He likens the word to rain. He says in 55:10, “As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.”

The word works! It will not return void. It changes lives. How does it do that? you ask. When you first begin to read the word, you realize that God loves you very much. That is something you would not know apart from revelation. That is the first thing that attracted me to this book. I grew up in a fatherless home, in a rather chaotic environment. Imagine how attractive it was for me to hear that I have a Father who loves me. You would not guess from this world that God cares about us, but he does! He cares so much for us that he became one of us. That is what the incarnation is all about. God is with us—God manifest in the flesh.

And God died for us. We would not understand the cross unless God explained it to us. And once we understand God’s love for us through the word, and we respond to it and receive it by faith, God begins to change us. The word affects our lives. We start to become more and more like Christ and like other believers who are following Christ. The word, working in our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit, begins to change

us, little by little. It works!

That is the only message that we have. And that is why we go through this book Sunday after Sunday, paragraph by paragraph. We don't have anything else to say.

But unfortunately, the word produces not only change, it also arouses violent opposition. Throughout history, every generation of Christians has known persecution and martyrdom. Christians have been bound in animal skins and left to die in the hot sun, thrown into lions' dens, burned alive, exiled. What does the wisdom of man achieve? Mankind killed the Lord of Glory who came to save them. That is what the wisdom of man achieves.

Why such a violent reaction to this remarkable word that has such power to bless and transform? I am sure there are many reasons, but it is clear from the Scriptures that the gospel is not impressed with human achievement. In fact, it exposes our human pride. Everyone comes to God in the same simple way: admitting that they cannot help themselves, and accepting salvation as a gift from the hand of God through Jesus Christ. Jesus himself declared, "No one comes to the Father but through me." God insists there is only one way to be reconciled with him, and that is through Jesus Christ. That makes a lot of people angry.

Paul goes to the extent of saying that these people are hostile to all men. Isn't that an odd thing to say about religious folk and others who consider themselves humane and civilized? Yet if they oppose the gospel and keep people from preaching it, they are hostile to all men. In other words they are preventing them from hearing the secrets that make life livable. That is still

true today. Try to pass out Bibles on a school campus today and someone will oppose you, often in the name of freedom and liberty.

So, taking the passage that we looked at today, together with the verses we studied last Sunday, we see that the Christian's manner and message are inextricably linked. Without kindness, truth is just so much dogma; without truth, kindness is mere sentimentality. It is God's truth, delivered with lovingkindness, that has power to persuade. The good news sounds good only when it is delivered with good manners.

The best proclamation of the gospel takes place in the context of loving relationships. There is no lasting influence without loving contact. How well did Jesus enunciate and exemplify this principle! One of the distinctive features of his life was his inclination to eat and drink with irreligious, morally untidy people.

But friendship involves more than togetherness and small talk. It means sharing what we know of our Lord. As he teaches us new things about himself we must give those thoughts away. It may be a word of grace to a troubled conscience, a word of comfort, a kindly stated word of correction, a partial or complete explanation of the gospel.

I can't tell you exactly what to say. You won't find it in any book. There are no instructions that work all the time. Witness must come from the heart. We, too, must tell what we have "seen and heard." The essential thing is to sit at Jesus' feet and learn from him. The more we receive, the more we have to give. It is through prayer, thoughtful Bible study and quiet meditation that Jesus speaks to our hearts. So we must stay in his presence until he entrusts us with his word.

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