

The Word at Work

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

***All praise on earth and highest Heaven be
That darkness and the fire and the flood
Cannot compete with the eternal three:
The Spirit and the water and the blood.
The blood-soaked cross where Light and Life once died
Delivers Satan's slaves from cells of sin
For then the Spirit comes to live inside,
Enriching and empowering within.
And then the water works its wonders too,
By granting strength to weaklings, faith to fools,
And light to those still stuck in sin's dark slough.
What men call wisdom water overrules
And proves designs of darkness are but fraud
And not the Word of the Eternal God.***

Marty was not my brother. But sometimes it sure looked like he was. Marty lived with his parents and four sisters in a tumbledown house that was back across the river from our farm.

But he spent most of his time at our house. So when my aunt set the table for supper, she automatically put out a plate for Marty.

When we put up hay, Marty helped heave the bales up into the hay mow. And when we dug potatoes in the garden or cut wood for the winter, Marty was with us.

I had not seen Marty for many years. Then one day I bumped into one of his sisters. And it did not take long to find out that she was a radiant Christian.

We talked on the sidewalk outside a store on the town square across from the courthouse. And before we parted, I asked her to tell Marty hello.

A few months later, I met that young lady again. She told me she had seen Marty and told him about me.

"He liked you," she smiled, "until I told him you're a Christian."

Jesus warned that the life changing message of salvation through His shed blood does not always bring people together. In fact, most of the time it divides them.

Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division; Luke 12:51

The division the Gospel of Jesus Christ brings to countries and cultures, to families and friendships is unfortunate. But it is inevitable. The prophet Amos put it best.

Can two walk together, unless they are agreed? Amos 3:3 (NKJV)

Peace once reigned all across Macedonia. And pagan gentiles in Thessalonica walked together in agreement and accord.

Then Paul and his assistant missionaries came to town. And within a few weeks, former friends were adversaries.

The apostle paused to write about the changes that came over Christians then and still do today. And the division it causes.

The Power of the Word

The startling transformation that came to people in Thessalonica started simply. Paul merely stood up in the synagogue and spoke words. But those words were not his own.

For this reason we also constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, Verse 13

Early in His earthly ministry, the Master spoke at synagogue services at Capernaum one Sabbath morning . And the small town Jews who heard Him were amazed.

They were amazed at His teaching; for He was teaching them as one having authority, and not as the scribes. Mark 1:22

The Jews who lived in that lakeside city had a right to be amazed. The Master's message was marvelously and wonderfully different than what they were used to.

Those Jews were used to the scribes. They would read a passage of scripture from the Law or the Prophets. Then they would quote all the opposing interpretations of those verses.

Paul had been personally tutored and trained by the Gamaliel, the most respected rabbi in all of Judaism. So Paul knew all the various insights and interpretations of the scriptures that ancient rabbis recorded. But like our Lord, he did not bother quoting any of them because he knew what they wrote came from the minds of men.

Instead, Paul told both Jews and gentiles about God's love, about the Savior's sacrifice and empty tomb. He taught them that all they had to do to be declared forever righteous was to place personal trust in Jesus as their Savior and Sovereign, as Redeemer and Lord.

And he was quick to add an important explanation. That message did not sprout and grow out of any man's mind. It was and is and ever shall be the Word of the one and only Living God.

A handful of Thessalonian Jews and a multitude of gentiles not only heard the great missionary's message. They dared to take Paul at his word.

They not only believed the Gospel was and is true. They accepted it as the Word of God.

That is where change begins. Indeed, that is what we must do if we are to experience the transforming power of the Gospel.

...you have been born again not of seed which is perishable but imperishable, that is, through the living and enduring word of God. 1 Peter 1:23

We must begin just as the Thessalonians did: by daring to go beyond merely believing the story of our Savior's perfect life, blood sacrifice for our sins and eternal victory over death is true.

Just as they did, we must receive the message of our Redeemer, as much more than the doctrine of Jesus' disciples. We must accept the Gospel as the infallibly inspired Word of God.

I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; Romans 1:16-17

When we accept the Gospel as God's Word, it goes to work. And it never stops working.

...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. Verse 13

God's Word begins by giving us freedom and forgiveness. But it does not stop there. It

continues to work in a believer's life.

First, a new, reborn life is produced by faith in God's Word. Then that same Word produces more and more faith in us.

It also produces wonderful changes in our attitudes, our actions and our aims. It does not struggle to work those wonders, either.

After all, God's Word abounds with all the infinite power of our living Lord.

"Is not My word like fire?" declares the Lord, "and like a hammer which shatters a rock?"
Jeremiah 23:29

...the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. Hebrews 4:12

The lesson is simple. We must not only receive God's Word. We must keep on receiving and believing it.

And we must never stop.

The Pattern of the Way

The infinite power of the infallible Word of God wrought wonderful changes in both Jews and gentiles at Thessalonica. They became new, reborn creations.

Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come. All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to Himself... 2 Corinthians 5:17-18 (ESV)

However, the changes the Thessalonians experienced were neither new nor original. The very same transformations had taken place far to the south in Judea.

For you, brethren, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, Verse 14

It is more than a little doubtful that Paul spent very much time explaining and describing the kind of changes born again Jews in Judea experienced. Time was precious. And he had a lot to teach.

Nevertheless, without even trying, Christians in Macedonia became like their brothers and sisters in Judea. And when Judean Jews trusted in Jesus, they became like their loving Lord.

They loved the sick and sorrowing, the lost and lonely, the troubled and tormented just like Jesus did when He was with them. They freely gave what they had to help other people, too.

Jewish believers were also filled with a hunger to worship and praise their newfound Savior.

Day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God... Acts 2:46-47

That is just the way it was with saints at Thessalonica. They were filled with the Lord's love, too. And they were eager to help needy people just like both Jesus and Jewish saints were.

They were also filled with a desire to learn more and more about their loving Lord. So they continued to crowd around Paul, Silas and Timothy to hear more about what God's Word said.

Yes, the Thessalonians unknowingly imitated Judean Christians. And the reason why is both simple and splendid.

The very same Holy Spirit that came in a powerful flood at Jerusalem at Pentecost was also poured into both Jews and gentiles in the seaside city of Thessalonica.

So the changes they experienced were inevitable. They are the works our Savior's Spirit always performs in those who place personal trust in Jesus as Savior and Sovereign.

Our God's essential nature is love. And when His divine Spirit comes to live within a life, He fills that person's heart and mind with that same love.

Our Creator is a holy, righteous God, too. So His indwelling Spirit also produces both the ability and the desire to please the Lord who loves us so much He laid down His life for us.

It makes no difference what country new believers live in. Neither does it matter what their culture or race might be.

When people trust in Jesus, both His Word and His Holy Spirit go to work. And He always produces the same changes.

He frees believers from slavery and brings them into a glorious, eternal freedom. He evicts the powers of darkness from a saint's heart and fills that person's life with His own life and light and love.

But those are not the only changes Christians experience. In addition to those inward changes, there are also outward changes.

...for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, Verse 14

Christians at Jerusalem were savagely persecuted by their own countrymen. Jews who were once friends became enemies.

And the very same thing happened at Thessalonica. Yes, Jews did incite opposition to new believers. But those saints' pagan neighbors quickly joined in opposing Christians.

The exciting inward changes God's Word and Spirit bring about are inevitable when people receive Christ as Redeemer. And so is the opposition of former friends and neighbors.

This world is under the power of the devil's darkness. And his host of demon spirits both hate and fear the Light of Jesus Christ.

So this world's opposition is unavoidable if we choose to trust in the Lord Jesus. But that is not really tragic.

It is proof we really are living in the Light.

The Penalty of the Willful

No one loved Jewish people more than Paul did. His great heart continually ached for them.

I could wish that I myself were accursed, separated from Christ for the sake of my brethren, my kinsmen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, Romans 9:3-4

The great apostle knew it was impossible. But he was willing to forfeit his own eternal salvation and spend an eternity in the horror of hell if it would bring his ancient people to faith in Jesus Christ.

Yes, Paul did love the Jews. But that does not mean he looked at them through rose colored glasses. He neither ignored nor excused the depth of their willful rebellion.

...the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out. Verses 14-15

For three years, our Savior pleaded with God's ancient people. He begged them to come to His heavenly Father in repentance, confession and faith.

And He performed so many miracles while they were watching, they simply could not deny His miracle working power. Nevertheless, they still refused to repent and trust in Him.

Their willful rebellion was nothing new, though. In the final words of his defense, Stephen

confronted the ruling Jews with the truth about their fathers' rebellion against God.

You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? Acts 7:51-52

Do not be misled. The Jews were neither especially nor exceptionally wicked. They were like every other human being.

We are all born in the devil's darkness. Coming to Christ is turning away from that darkness and submitting to His Light.

And in Christ's commission to Paul, He explained precisely what those images of darkness and light really mean.

I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the dominion of Satan to God, Acts 26:17-18

Neither Jews in Judea nor gentiles in Thessalonica realized it. But they were slaves in the devil's dominion of darkness. That is why they hated anyone and everyone, both prophets and apostles, who served the Savior, the Lord of Light.

For everyone who does evil hates the Light, and does not come to the Light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. John 3:20

That is why they killed the prophets the sovereign Lord sent to them. And that is why they eagerly indulged both bribery and lies to murder their own Messiah.

He is the Light of the world. And they hated Him. That hatred was so intense, they not only rejected Christ as their own Redeemer. They did not want anyone else to come to His life and love, either.

...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 so that they may be saved; Verses 15-16

When Paul left Thessalonica, he traveled in the dark of night to Berea. There, he found Jews who were willing to weigh the evidence and search the scriptures to test the truth of the message the apostle presented to them.

But it was not long before Jews in Thessalonica heard about it.

...when the Jews of Thessalonica found out that the word of God had been proclaimed by Paul in Berea also, they came there as well, agitating and stirring up the crowds. Acts 17:13

Those Jews refused to trust in Jesus as their Messiah. And they did not want other Jews to do so, either. But they did not stop there. They also did everything they could to keep Paul from telling gentiles about Christ's cross and empty tomb.

There is a terrible penalty for willful rebellion that metastasises into opposition. It finally fills the cup of God's wrath.

...with the result that they always fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them to the utmost. Verse 16

There is unspeakable joy and eternal peace in living in the Light of a loving relationship with the Lord Jesus. And while there is no satisfaction in rejecting our Redeemer. That is not the only penalty.

Our God will surely pour out His wrath upon those who hate His Light. And once that judgement is given, there is no turning back.