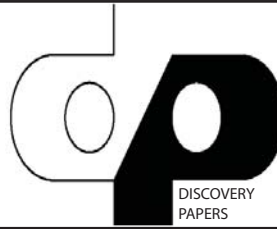


THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

SERIES: BETWEEN THE TIMES



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1 & 2 Thessalonians
2nd Message
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1 Thessalonians 1:1-10, 2:13-16

Words, of course, can be powerful. Consider these words from U.S. history:

“Give me liberty or give me death” (Patrick Henry, 1775).

“With malice toward none, with charity for all” (Abraham Lincoln, 1865).

“The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” (Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1933).

“My fellow Americans, ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” (John F. Kennedy, 1961).

“I have a dream” (Martin Luther King, 1963).

Today we will hear some powerful words, even more powerful than those cited above. If we hear them and believe them, they will help us work meaningfully, live hopefully and joyfully, and serve as positive and influential examples to others. What are they? To find out, and to appreciate their impact, we’ll need to first of all consider the words of the apostle Paul in the first two chapters of his first letter to the Thessalonians.

This week, we’ll examine the words and their effect on the Thessalonians. Next week, we’ll examine how Paul and his companions brought them the gospel.

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10:

Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy,

To the church of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

Grace to you and peace.

²We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, ³remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁴For we know, brothers loved by God, that he

has chosen you, ⁵because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction. You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. ⁶And you became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, ⁷so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. ⁸For not only has the word of the Lord sounded forth from you in Macedonia and Achaia, but your faith in God has gone forth everywhere, so that we need not say anything. ⁹For they themselves report concerning us the kind of reception we had among you, and how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, ¹⁰and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, Jesus who delivers us from the wrath to come.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16:

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, which is at work in you believers. ¹⁴For you, brothers, became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea. For you suffered the same things from your own countrymen as they did from the Jews, ¹⁵who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind ¹⁶by hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles that they might be saved—so as always to fill up the measure of their sins. But wrath has come upon them at last!

What is the word?

Paul uses the noun “word” six times in these verses. What is the word? He further defines it as “the word of the Lord” and “the word of God.” Many of us are accustomed to thinking of the word of God as the Scriptures. Someone might begin a Bible study or a

sermon by saying, “Let’s look at God’s word.” But is that what Paul is referring to here? Most often, when the writers of the New Testament speak of “the word,” they do so not in reference to the Scriptures per se but to the gospel message, which is, of course, at the heart of the Scriptures. That’s what Paul means here. Note that he says that “our *gospel* came to you not only in *word* . . .” When Paul says “word,” he means gospel.

What is the gospel? Just as we may be prone to misunderstand what Paul means by “word,” because of the way we have heard it used, we may also be prone to misunderstand what he means by the “gospel,” also because of the way we have heard it used. Paul does not here define the gospel, presumably because he’s already spoken of it to the Thessalonians and they know his meaning.

However, from the book of Acts, we know at least some of the words Paul spoke to the Thessalonians when he first came to their city. He told them that “it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead,” concluding, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ” (Acts 17:3). The Christ, in Jewish thinking, was the ultimate king of Israel, destined to be the king of the world. At that time, Caesar, the Roman ruler, was king of the world. Opposition to Paul and his companions surfaced in Thessalonica because they were “saying that there is another king, Jesus” (Acts 17:7). From Paul’s appearance in Thessalonica, we’re left with the impression that his gospel concerned the death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus and that the Thessalonians believed this gospel, pledging their allegiance to Jesus. Indeed, as Paul observes in this letter, the Thessalonians “turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.” No doubt Paul spoke many other words about the gospel to the Thessalonians, but these are the ones we know about.

Likewise, when Paul preached the gospel in Antioch in Pisidia, he spoke of the death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus and promised forgiveness of sins and freedom from the Law of Moses for those who believed in Jesus (Acts 13:26-41). In Lystra, Paul defined the gospel as a command to turn from vain idols to a living God (Acts 14:15). In Philippi, he told a jailer, “Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household” (Acts 16:31). Paul told the Athenians that God would judge the world and that they should repent, especially in view of the resurrection (Acts 17:30-31). He told the Corinthians that Jesus was the Christ, the Jewish king (Acts 18:5). He reminded the Ephesians that he had spoken to them “of repentance toward God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). He told King Agrippa that Jesus had commissioned him to open the

eyes of Gentiles “so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me” (Acts 26:16-18). In Rome, he proclaimed “the kingdom of God” and taught about “the Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 28:31).

Paul told the Romans in his letter to them that the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” inasmuch as it reveals the righteousness, or faithfulness, of God (Romans 1:16-17). Paul reminded the Corinthians, in his first letter to them, of the gospel that he delivered to them: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” and that he appeared to many (1 Corinthians 15:3-6).

Piecing together what Paul said and wrote, we conclude that his gospel message conveys a story, a summons, and a promise. First, the gospel tells the *story* of the death, resurrection, and reign of Jesus Christ, thereby revealing God’s faithfulness to defeat evil. Second, the gospel *summons* people to turn from both false beliefs and from Satan, who is behind those false beliefs, and to instead give their allegiance to the Lord Jesus Christ. Finally, the gospel *promises* salvation, which features victory over evil, forgiveness of sins, freedom from the law, and a place for those who give their allegiance to Jesus.

When Paul wants to compress the gospel message, press it down, and shake it together, it comes out like this, running over: “Jesus Christ is Lord” (Acts 10:36, Romans 10:9, 1 Corinthians 12:3, Philippians 2:11). Jesus, the Jewish king, having won a great victory over evil, now reigns over the entire world.

The gospel of the individual

In Paul’s day, the gospel of God confronted the gospel of Rome, which declared, “Caesar is Lord.” In our day, the gospel of God confronts the gospel of the individual, which declares, in so many words, “You are Lord.” It’s an intoxicating false gospel, perhaps the most powerful false gospel the world has ever seen. The gospel of the individual promises that you can be and do anything you want. You are lord. And God, if he is said to exist at all, serves to underwrite your ambitions.

I would therefore submit that the most powerful words in U.S. history are not “Give me liberty or give me death,” “With malice toward none, with charity for all,” “We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” “Ask

not what you can do for your country,” or “I have a dream.” It seems to me that the most powerful words in U.S. history are these: “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness” (Declaration of Independence, 1776). There is much good in that sentence. Indeed, in many ways it reflects truths espoused by the Scriptures. For the most part, however, over time the sentence has been harnessed to promote an extreme version of individualism. Rights are exalted; responsibility, especially responsibility to the Creator who endowed us with rights, is neglected.

As in the days of Judges, people do what is right in their own eyes, with right being defined almost exclusively as what *feels* right. We are encouraged to do what we want, but is doing what we want getting us what we want?

A psychologist tells the story of a client who more or less chose to do whatever she wanted. She gave herself to an endless round of parties, but she became exhausted by the pursuit of pleasure. When the psychologist told her she should simply stop, she responded, “You mean I don’t have to do what I want to do?”¹ People think they have to do what they want to do, but doing what they want to do isn’t getting them what they want. Freedom, as it is currently defined, is collapsing into despair.

As those who live in a world of extreme individualism, we need something other than the gospel of the individual. We need the gospel of Jesus Christ.

The power of the word

The gospel comes to us, and to all who hear it, as it came to the Thessalonians: with words. The words themselves—the story, the summons, the promise, the announcement—have power, especially because they’re true. But the gospel doesn’t come only with the power of words, it also comes with the power of the Holy Spirit, who opens hearts to the words, sometimes with signs and wonders (1 Corinthians 12:8-10). Moreover, the gospel comes with “full conviction,” or, more likely, with “fullness”—that is, the fullness of God. God puts everything he has into gospel message. Indeed, God gave everything he had, his Son, to create the gospel message.

If you believe the gospel, however it came to you, it came to you with the power of words, the power of the Holy Spirit, and the power of the fullness of God. You may not have been aware of any of this when you came to believe the gospel, but at some point, you may have become aware of some sort of power you didn’t quite

understand. You may have felt an inkling, a burning, or a conviction. The gospel is, after all, not “the word of men,” though it comes through the words of men and women, but the “word of God.”

The gospel not only comes to unbelievers, skeptics, and seekers, it also continues to come to those of us who already believe, even to those of us who have believed for quite some time: the word of God is “at work in you believers.” Likewise, Paul says that the gospel is “the power of God for salvation to *everyone who believes*” (Romans 1:16). What sort of work, then, does the gospel do in those who already believe? What did the gospel effect in the Thessalonians after they came to faith? The gospel helped them to work meaningfully; live hopefully and joyfully, even in the face of suffering; and serve as positive and influential examples to others.

What the gospel does

First, the gospel helped the Thessalonians to work meaningfully. It’s hard to see much difference between the words “work” and “labor” in 1 Thessalonians 1:3. Perhaps Paul uses the two words to speak of any kind of work, from what you do for a living to what you do in your “off hours.” Paul used both words in both contexts. However and wherever we work, why do we work? The Thessalonians worked because of their faith. They believed the gospel, giving their their allegiance to Christ, and they worked, even in supposedly secular fields, for the sake of Christ, in service to him. Paul wrote to the Colossians, “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father,” and, “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord, rather than for men” (Colossians 3:17, 23). The Thessalonians not only worked because of their faith, they also labored because of their love. They were “loved by God,” and God’s love for them in Christ motivated them to serve both those inside and outside the church.

If you believe the gospel, no matter who or what you work for, you work for Christ, and you work because you’re loved: you work for someone—no less than Christ himself—who loves you and gave his life for you. With the gospel of the individual, on the other hand, you work for yourself, not for Christ, and you have to somehow hold up under the crushing weight of your ambitions, whether met or unmet.

Second, the gospel helped the Thessalonians to live hopefully and joyfully, even in the face of suffering, including persecution at the hands of their countrymen. Paul takes note of their “steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” and observes that they learned to wait

for God's Son to appear from heaven to consummate the kingdom of God. The hope they had was at least partially responsible for their joy in the face of "much affliction."

If you believe the gospel, you have hope and joy because you know that Christ is coming back to consummate his reign and make all things beautiful. With the gospel of the individual, on the other hand, you try to hope and you seek for joy, but with only a few decades allotted to you, at best, what can you hope for? Moreover, if you know that one day your days will come to an end, then all joy is fleeting. You may hope for an afterlife of some sort, but apart from the gospel of Jesus Christ, your hope is far from sure.

Third, the gospel helped the Thessalonians serve as positive and influential examples to others. The word "sounded forth" from them in that others heard that they believed the gospel in spite of the suffering it caused them and that they shared the gospel in their travels. Their witness was so effective, in fact, that when Paul came to certain places to preach the gospel, the gospel had already reached those places through the Thessalonian believers, either directly, through their travels, or indirectly, through travelers who had been influenced by them. Thessalonica was a seaport, on the road to Rome.

If you believe the gospel, the gospel inspires you to be an inspiration to others, even if you're not trying to be an inspiration. With the gospel of the individual, on the other hand, maybe you can serve as an example to others, but how are you influencing them: to do what they want to do, to work for themselves, to reach for false hope and fleeting joy?

A life

The power of the gospel is often evident during memorial services for those who have believed the gospel and been renewed by the gospel. In December, I attended a memorial service for my dentist, Rich Jensen, who died of cancer just before his sixtieth birthday. Rich embraced the gospel when he was young, and he was renewed by it throughout his life.

Rich worked meaningfully. He considered his job both a gift from God and a ministry and therefore always put people first. Moreover, he was a devoted volunteer with Young Life, an outreach ministry to

teenagers. For Rich, both dentistry and Young Life were works of faith and labors of love. The gospel infused both endeavors.

Rich also lived hopefully and joyfully, even in the face of suffering— even as he walked through the valley of the shadow of death. When he was told he had cancer, he responded, "God is in this." The memorial service featured a slide show, which included a photo near the end of his life. He was sitting up in a hospital bed; hairless, for what the treatment had done to him; and hooked up to whatever contraptions were necessary at that point. He was wearing a big smile and giving the thumbs-up sign.

Finally, Rich was a positive and influential example to others. Several people who were chosen to speak at his memorial service said he treated them as if they were his best friend. The pastor who officiated at the memorial service said Rich told him, just before he died, "It's about relationships." The pastor said, "I'll never forget it." Without really trying, Rich influenced us to put relationships first, because that's what he did. The memorial service was attended by five hundred people— five hundred of his best friends!

A spiritually rich life

The gospel of the individual has its appeal, but even many of its adherents grow weary of it after a while, becoming, in the words of *New York Times* columnist David Brooks, a secular observer, "people who are vaguely aware that they are not living the spiritually richest life" and who are "ill-equipped to know how they might do so."² Do you want a spiritually rich life? Do you want to work meaningfully, live hopefully and joyfully, and serve as a positive and influential example to others? Let me leave you with four words, the most powerful words ever spoken:

Jesus Christ is Lord.

Notes

- ¹ Charles Colson, *Chuck Colson Speaks* (Uhrichsville, OH: Promise Press, 2000), 11.
- ² David Brooks, "The Ambition Explosion," *New York Times* (Nov. 27, 2014), A31.