

As It Actually Is

1 Thessalonians 1:13-16

Sitting beneath a shade tree, a farmer felt the call to ministry when he looked up and saw the letters “P & C” in the clouds and interpreted them to mean, “Preach Christ.” He sold his farm and began to preach – AND HE WAS HORRIBLE. After one particularly grueling message, a neighbor took him aside and asked, “Are you sure God wasn’t saying, “Plant Corn”?”

We are all anxious to know what God has to say, but we are not always very keen on looking to where He has already spoken? Biblical illiteracy cripples the believer. A man must be saturated in biblical truth before he can accurately measure the reliability of more subjective impressions.

I’m sure the intent was to honor the Bible when someone coined the expression:

“God said it. I believe it. That settles it.”

However, the logic of that slogan actually undermines any real argument for biblical authority. Had Jim introduced the morning’s text by saying, “The Word of God says, and I agree” ... what force would that have added what was read? A less pithy, but more Bible-honoring slogan might be:

“God said it. That alone settles it.

(Of course, it behooves me to believe it, but whether I do or don’t, nothing essential about the nature of absolute truth is altered one iota.)”

The Bible is the book of the Lord God Almighty. Perhaps, I owe you an apology if I have too often simply presumed that you understood that. On the other hand, it could make you uncomfortable if I were to constantly make such a clarification and harp on the issue:

“If I have not always been clear that this Book we open today is God-breathed, inerrant and infallible, I apologize. Having clarified that, know clearly that God expects you to listen and obey. Your preacher is prone to a faulty application here or a lame joke there, but the essence of his text is not for your scrutiny. You are to be scrutinized by it.”

Paul was delighted by the spiritual progress of the Thessalonian believers. In chapter one, he expressed his gratitude to God that every evidence pointed to the fact that they were true believers ... “your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:3). Now, he reiterates his thankfulness to God, specifically, for how they had received his teaching, not as something of human origin, “but as it actually is, the word of God ...” How were Paul’s words so much more than just Paul’s words?

I. The Divinity Inherent to God’s Word (13)

¹³And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.

A. What Man Could Have Dreamed Up the Gospel?

The origin of the Gospel dates back to Eden, but redemptive history started taking a precise form when God called an old nomad and promised to make a nation out of his heirs. In the third generation of Abraham, Jacob, *aka* Israel, moved his little tribe to Egypt. The Israelites became so numerous that they unnerved the Pharaoh of Egypt, so he made them slaves. Four centuries later, God raised up Moses to lead them to a Land of Promise, but only after a forty-year cardiac workout of wandering intended to train their hearts to trust God and to obey His Laws.

The tiny nation peaked in the days of David and Solomon, only to split. Ten of the twelve tribes that escaped Egypt ceased to exist. The remaining two endured captivity in a foreign land. After they returned, they endured one foreign occupation after another. They called themselves “God’s chosen”. That must have amused the various empires that walked all over them. Eventually, God decided that it was time to send a prophesied, anointed rescuer – a *Messiah*. But, the Rescuer-King He sent was not like any king could ever have expected.

In the “hickest” region of the tiny land of Abraham’s descendents, this awaited Son of David was born of a virgin peasant in a stable. His arrival was occasioned by the appearance of angels as well as visits by shepherds and Persian wise men. Raised by a carpenter, this apparent son of a carpenter grew up, revealed the truth of God to his countrymen and was executed for His trouble. But, He was raised to life and shown to be the Son of God. So, whether you are a peasant or a king, your eternal destiny rests on your faith response to Jesus. That is the apostolic gospel.

Can I ask you something? If you were going to perpetrate a hoax on the world about God’s plan to save it, is that a story you would fabricate? Would such a tale have had any chance to continue drawing disciples even after two millennia? Paul himself recognized how silly it must sound to cynical Gentiles and how offensive to religiously proud Jews. Had he been trying to foist anything upon people, surely, he could have invented a more suave gospel. But, what I told you is the same story that Paul impressed upon the believers in Thessalonica as the truth of God.

B. Is Preaching Really More than Just a Man Speaking to Men?

Following the service, the pastor was greeting the worshippers as they exited. As one man shook his hand, he looked intently at the preacher and said, “Powerful sermons, Pastor. Thoughtful, well researched. I can always see myself in them ... and I want you to knock it off.”

The Thessalonians “received”, or “welcomed” Paul’s message for what it actually was, “the word of God.” What does that mean? Was it his passion, something in his voice, in his eyes? No doubt, but there had to be more. Part of the answer is right here in verse 13: “the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.” We hear with our ears, but the pleadings of the Holy Spirit, the power inherent to truth and God’s grace that awakens our capacity to believe; these things must be present to set God’s Word in operation. Human tongues proclaim the Gospel. Human ears hear it. That’s God’s strategy, but it is faith that really sets things in motion.

A heard gospel that is not combined with faith is of no value. The story may produce sorrow and a sense of sin, but faith responds to godly sorrow with repentance, that determination that things are going to be different. Faith compels a man to confess his agreement with the Spirit’s message that Jesus Christ is the crucified and now risen Lord of all. Faith drives a man to want to submit to the sacrament of baptism that identifies him with Christ and to participate in another sacrament that regularly recognizes a Gospel proclamation through the simple mediums of bread and a cup. Faith, living faith, is what awakens the desire in a man to walk in good deeds and obedience to God.

And, finally, faith is what causes a man, alone, or with the saints of God, to *DARE* to pray,

“Lord, as I open Your Word to explore it, to expose it and even to dissect it so that my head might better understand it, I also open my heart so that your Word might explore me, expose me and dissect me so that my life might better reflect it. Amen.”

II. The Dynamic Ignited by God’s Word (14)

... ¹⁴For you, brothers, became imitators of God’s churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews ...

A. God’s Word Empowers You to Suffer with a Song in Your Heart

Immediately before Paul and Silas had come to Thessalonica, they had been unlawfully beaten and imprisoned in Philippi; unlawfully because they were Roman citizens. But, through the night, the two men were heard by their fellow prisoners “praying and singing hymns to God” (Acts 16:25). That’s an odd reaction to a beating, but such is the power of the Word of God.

Paul commended the Thessalonians for imitating the Judean churches in this matter of suffering. Neither group had to suffer. All they had to do to avoid mistreatment was to renounce Christ. Persecution in Judea had begun immediately. The religious leaders could not explain Jesus’ Resurrection, but He had vanished, so they at least hoped that they were done with that troublemaker. But soon, His disciples were proclaiming salvation in Jesus’ Name. Such heresy could not stand. Threats, the arrest of key leaders and other bully tactics by the Jews failed to silence the disciples. A mob stoned Stephen. Eventually, a full-blown persecution of the church raged. Paul knew this was so. At the time, he had been the tip of the spear in the Jewish war on Jesus.

Yet, all the Jewish persecutors really accomplished was to scatter missionaries throughout the region. Now, they had to take their persecution efforts on the road. In fact, Paul was heading to Damascus to harass believers there when Jesus appeared and redirected the course of his life.

Now, the Thessalonians were suffering at the hands of their countrymen. The harassment of the Christians in Thessalonica (the capital city of Macedonia) had been instigated by the Jews, but they had recruited some of the political leaders of that city to their cause by slandering the faith. Still, Paul strongly suspected that God could use the perseverance of the Thessalonian church to bring to pass His purposes just as He had done through the faithfulness of the Judean believers.

B. God’s Word Empowers You to Sacrifice with a Smile on Your Face

We have to step out of the text to see that Paul was right. God would use perseverant believers in the region of Macedonia, not to scatter them, but to forge them into exemplary communities of faith. Second only to the widow Jesus observed at the temple sacrificing everything she had to live on, these believers became the supreme biblical model for generosity in spite of having very little to give.

Later, Paul would raise money to help believers in Jerusalem who were coping with a famine. Apparently the rather messed-up Corinthian church struggled with “cheerful” giving much as they struggled with many other faith basics. So that they might “prove the sincerity” of their love, Paul set before them the destitute churches of Macedonia. Now, Macedonia was not a poor place. Trade routes abounded. Commerce boomed. So, it is not far-fetched to speculate that these folks were impoverished because of persecution by a hostile state. But, poverty in no way marred their understanding that they were always rich enough to be generous. Out of “extreme poverty ... they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability” (2 Corinthians 8:2, 3).

A bleak economy has dominated the news. Are you scared? Do we need to throw up pictures of third-world believers with huge smiles on their faces, who are advancing God's kingdom in spite of persecution and with resources that are paltry compared to ours? Must we run a loop of such images to be reminded that joy, kingdom impact and generosity are not dependent on affluence – but that in fact, affluence might be one of our most truly hellish distractions?

Where the Word of God is operative in a life or in a church, there is power that might not be recognizable by those who measure power in dollars, influence, credentials or notoriety.

“... ²⁷But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. ²⁸He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, ²⁹so that no one may boast before him.
– 1 Corinthians 1:27-29

III. The Deference Inspired through God's Word (15, 16)

A. The Sins of the Jews (and other Persecutors) verses 15, 16a

... ¹⁵who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men ¹⁶in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved.

What is Paul's temperament here? Is he bitter towards his fellow Jews, for mistreatment at their hands? No, Paul is not resentful. He does question God's fairness when he is treated unfairly. He does not obsess over being vindicated. He defers to God's wisdom and timing.

Paul was not bitter, but still, what was, was. Roman crucifixion was the instrument of Jesus' execution but Paul, as a Jew, credits his own countrymen as the instigators. He may have been one that cried out to Pilate: “Let his blood be on us and on our children!” (Matthew 27:26).

They killed the prophets (even though those contemporary with Jesus adorned the tombs of those same prophets and insisted that they would have seen things more clearly than did their forefathers). Not content simply to reject the gospel, they opposed it. Paul says that they “drove us out.” The obvious question: “When and where did they do that?” A fair answer: “Pretty well everywhere and all the time.” Of all the persecutions of Christians recorded in the book of Acts, only two do not have the Jews front and center. The Jews misunderstood their status as God's chosen people. They were chosen to be God's light to the world, even to the Gentiles, but they bitterly resented Paul's message that God had a place for Gentiles in His kingdom.

Now, we know why the Jews were so hostile toward the Christian message. They convinced themselves that they were honoring God even though Paul clarifies that they were not. But what drives modern scoffers, oppressors and persecutors? Are people really that offended at the sight of nativity scenes in public squares or plaques of the Ten Commandments in courthouses – really? Is it really because some among history's crackpots have appropriated Jesus' Name for their wars and atrocities? Don't you believe that today there has to be more to it than just that?

Truth exposes distortion. The Gospel exposed the Jewish distortions about pleasing God. Today, the Gospel still exposes the modern religious distortion that anything and everything pleases God. The message of a cross, the call to repentance, the rhetoric of salvation – these all imply a need caused by sin that many simply do not wish to hear. Something keeps the world from just being content to dismiss believers as nuts. Something causes the world to feel it must oppose the Gospel. Something about the Word of God unsettles unrepentant hearts. Nevertheless, relax ...

B. God Will Have His Way verse 16b

... In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last.

That is severe, troubling and unpleasant language, but it does not spring from Paul's resentment toward those who harassed him. Paul loved his countrymen. He yearned for their repentance.

¹I speak the truth in Christ - I am not lying, my conscience confirms it in the Holy Spirit - ²I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. ³For I could wish that I myself were cursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, those of my own race, ⁴the people of Israel.

- Romans 9:1-4

To Paul, as to Jesus, the rejection of *Messiah* would spell the beginning of the end for the nation of Israel in regard to averting God's "wrath." In a little more than a decade, Rome would level Jerusalem. Some believe that this is the "wrath" to which Paul refers. Others believe that it was just Phase One of a wrath that has followed the Jews for centuries. Paul describes a great influx of Jews who will come to Jesus, but whether or not that hints at some divine future plan for national Israel in the last days is something about which students of the end time don't have to agree.

What I take from the text is that God will deal with persecutors and other sinners in His time and in His way. Those who resist His grace will taste His wrath. They are in God's hands. In the meantime, we are called not as heralds of judgment but of the grace that averts judgment. When we speak of God's wrath, we must do so humbly and with no hint of delight, for God finds no delight in the fate of the wicked. Jesus spoke vividly of judgment, but He also wept over the matter:

³⁷"O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing. - Matthew 23:37

Sin matters. God will judge wickedness. He will not modify that which He has always defined as sin. It's not pleasant, but what is, is. Now, as we endeavor to proclaim what is and what will be, let us be very cautious that no one detects arrogance in our voices so much as tears in our eyes.

After explaining latitude, longitude, degrees and minutes the teacher asked, "Suppose I asked you to meet me for lunch at 23 degrees, 4 minutes north latitude and 45 degrees, 15 minutes east longitude . . .?" After a confused silence, a voice volunteered, "I guess you'd be eating alone."

One burden in sharing Christ is clarity, not just rhetoric. Still, we must not obsess over the burden to "be relevant" to the point that we minimize what is essential. The relevance of God's Word is axiomatic. We are instruments of the Word of God. Apart from the Holy Spirit and the faith of the hearer, our efforts are hollow, so we need to take care that we are not "dumbing down" the Gospel to the point that it is just so many practical pointers for successful living. A philosophy oozing of humanity rather than powerfully shown to be the Word of God.

May we become as conscientious in praying over this matter, that we will be used by the Holy Spirit as He awakens faith in others, as we are over our own roles of compiling our words and arguments.