

## The Word of God

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16

### *Longing for God's Word*

Have you ever wished that God would speak to you? I have. I remember sitting in my apartment in my junior year at the university, wishing that I could hear God's voice. I had been reading about Abraham, and longed for the tangible divine connection that he had. I had transferred from Virginia Tech that fall, and I had needed God's guidance about making such a move. And at the summer conference in the spring I met a beautiful young woman, and I really wished that God would tell me what to do about her.

My wish to hear God's voice that day in my junior year was mainly wistful, but this desire can become fiercely urgent when you have an important decision to make or when calamity strikes. Most of us sense that a decision about whether to accept a job offer from Boeing or from Microsoft, or to marry Sally or Susan, are matters in which God *must* help us if we are to avoid a terrible mistake. When your favorite aunt is dying of cancer, or you fail to get into med school, or you learn that your parents are getting divorced – you feel an overwhelming need to hear from God. And when your desperate prayers fade into the blackness, it can be hard to believe that God is there at all, or if He is listening.

I do not see any evidence that the believers in ancient Thessalonica heard God speak in an audible voice, but they did hear the apostle Paul. And Paul made the outrageous claim that his words were the word of God. Paul was able to make this claim because he was an apostle. An apostle was someone authorized to speak for some authority. In a day when there were no cell phones, computers, or satellites, messages traveled very slowly. The Roman emperor would appoint apostles to represent him in matters far from Rome. An apostle was rather like an ambassador on steroids. He would negotiate with other nations, but there was no need for the emperor to ratify the apostle's word. His word was the emperor's word, and when he spoke, his voice was that of the emperor. So when Jesus appointed apostles, He enabled them to speak His very own words. The word of Paul the apostle *is* the word of God – and when we hear Paul speak, we in fact hear God.

The passage before us tonight makes three claims about the word of God. We see that it is a divine word, it is a working word, and it is an effective word.

### *A Divine Word*

If you have grown up in church you have often heard the phrase “the word of God,” which we usually take to be synonymous with the Bible. We do not doubt that God spoke to Moses, David, and Paul, and that the Bible is a faithful record of those divine encounters. And we usually think of the Bible as a book that tells us how to be saved and how to live. We know, somewhere in the back of our minds, that God actually spoke these words, but usually they somehow seem as dry and lifeless as the paper they are printed on.

If you have not grown up in the church, and if you are not yet a believer in Jesus, you may not give the Bible even this much credit. You probably think of the Bible as a valuable religious book, with high moral instruction. But the prevailing view among those who do not believe in Jesus is that the Bible was written by men, and that is all there is to it.

Paul challenges all of us – believers and unbelievers – with the example of the Thessalonians, who accepted the word of God as what it really is – the word of God. Now I know it sounds trivial – maybe even a bit stupid – to say that the word of God is the word of God. But Paul knew that people tend to accept the word of God as something else – like a guide to salvation or moral living. What most of us do not do, much of the time, is to receive God's word as divine speech. And the proof is that in difficulty or hardship, we still wish for a word from God.

If you knew that Jesus was going to be speaking in person across town tonight, would you come to RUF, or would you go to hear Jesus? How about tomorrow night? Would you go to a movie with your friends, or go to hear Jesus? What about Sunday morning? Would you get out of bed to hear Jesus, or would you sleep in? Now you know that the correct answer for those who love Jesus is that they would cancel any other engagement to see and hear Jesus. But the honest answer is usually different. I say this because whenever the Bible is read, Jesus *is* speaking – and most of us do not race off with excitement to church on Sunday morning.

The word of God is the word of God, but we usually treat it as an inspiring moment, not as a divine encounter. Be careful to notice the issue here. Paul is not saying that the Bible becomes the word of God when we are receptive to it. Paul is not saying that God speaks when we are ready to listen. Absolutely not! Jesus shows up and speaks whenever the Bible is read – whether you think so or not. The issue is not whether God speaks through His word. The issue is whether you believe it. And if you do not believe that God speaks through the Bible, you are headed for trouble.

We are in a much different situation than the ancient Thessalonians. They had never heard God speak until Paul showed up in town. Some would have been illiterate, and most who could read would not have had access to the Old Testament or to Paul's letters. Opportunities to hear God were rare and treasured. By contrast, we have access to Bibles everywhere, and we can hear the Bible read and preached in churches and meetings like this every day of the week. The Thessalonians who loved Jesus would undoubtedly drop everything to go hear Paul, because such opportunities were rare, and other engagements could be rescheduled. But if you attended every Christian event in Providence, you would never graduate!

So the challenge to you is not to take advantage of every opportunity to hear God whenever the Bible is read and preached. For you the challenge is to receive it as the voice of God, instead of as a religious book. Paul calls us to reorient our thinking, to hear the Bible as God speaking to us. Paul tells me, wishing to hear God like Abraham heard Him, that God speaks to me the same way when I read the Bible. It may seem different. I may expect a powerful encounter when God speaks, and the ordinariness of reading the Bible may disappoint me. Particularly when I am in distress or am troubled, when I long for a tangible expression of God's presence, reading the Bible may seem boring and useless. And it is in those moments when I will either be like the Thessalonians and accept the Bible as the word of God, or persist in my disappointment with God.

### ***A Working Word***

Immediately after asserting that the word of God is the word of God, Paul claims that the word of God is at work in believers. The word of God is a divine word, and it is also a working word.

I suppose you know the children's saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me." And I suppose you know how false that is. I suppose you can remember words which have been very hurtful to you and to others.

It is curious, isn't it, how a particular disruption of the atmosphere by sound waves can cause such powerful effects. A father's criticism, "If you don't get better grades, you will be a failure," can haunt you for life. A father's praise, "I am proud of you, son," can give you the courage to attempt big challenges. In physics we define work as force applied through a distance, and words do not qualify. And so many times it does seem that words are so useless. You try and try to persuade your friend to believe in Jesus, but she never does. You work for months on application essays to Harvard, and they fall flat when the admissions people read them. You coax, beg, and plead for your roommates to clean up the place, but they never do. Words seem so weak, so helpless, so pathetic. In your worse moments you want to slug your roommates and

bribe the admissions officers. Now there's an approach that will really work! Force applied through distance. You are guaranteed to get results! But in spite of these disappointing moments, there are those times in which words have made a lasting mark.

If our words can be so powerful, how much more can God's word do real work. In fact, all through the Bible, speaking words is the primary means by which God works. In the beginning God created the universe by speaking. And although He would sometimes use objects to accomplish His will, they were always accompanied by His words. If you believe in Jesus and accept the Bible as God's word, then you must know that God's word is at work in the world. Again, the issue is whether you believe this or not. When God speaks, is it the powerful voice of creation, the reverberating voice of your father – or is it the pathetic voice of you trying in vain to persuade your roommates to clean up your apartment?

Paul declares that the word of God is at work in believers, and this is good news! You may not feel any different now than when you walked in this door tonight. You may be sleepy on Sunday morning and not grasp all the minister has to say. You may read some parts of scripture and not understand it very well, or be outright confused, or even angry. The opening verses of Revelation say that those who read and hear and keep the words of this prophecy will be blessed. The blessing is not related to your level of understanding this difficult book. It is related to your level of reading and hearing and keeping, and that is good news! God is at work in you through His word – even when you are not aware of it.

So if God's word is at work in you, what is He doing? He is doing what He said He would do. He is fulfilling His promises in you. When you believe in Jesus, God promises to be with you, to send His Holy Spirit to you, to make you holy and God-like. He is growing your understanding of God. He is growing your faith. He is growing your love for other people and ability to serve them. He is replacing your sinful desires and perspectives with godly desires and perspectives. Day by day we see the world more the way God sees it, we love the things God loves, we think the way God thinks, we do the things God does. And God accomplishes all this by His word.

So there I am at Virginia Tech, wondering what I should do next. An elder in my church, who was chairman of the Geology Department, suggested I transfer to Johns Hopkins. Should I? How would I know? I prayed for guidance. I didn't hear anything. I read the Bible. I didn't find any instructions. Finally I made a blind stab at a decision. Now looking back, what happened? Was God silent in my moment of need? Was I abandoned to make my way through life the best I could? Should I have sought a better church, one with more power, closer to God? But Paul says that God's word is at work in me. And Paul is not merely giving me pious advice. Paul is an apostle, and he speaks the word of God. *God* says that He is at work in me. Is He telling the truth? Or is God lying?

I am confident that God led me to transfer from Virginia Tech to Johns Hopkins. I never *felt* led. I never heard anything like God speaking. I never found a verse in scripture that offered me guidance. But all those concerns miss the point. God's promise is that as I receive His word, He is at work in me. God powerfully, irresistibly, unfailingly led me by His word. In some secret, mysterious way, God used the scripture that I read and heard in those days to work in me His will, and brought me to a decision consistent with His plan. And what is the proof of this? The proof is that God promises to work in me, and God never lies.

### ***An Effective Word***

Are you doubtful? Does it seem hard to believe that God is at work in believers when His word is read? Paul offers proof. He points out the observable change in the lives of the Thessalonians. Previously they had been pagans like their neighbors, but now they are more like the believing Jews in Judea than the

pagan Greeks in Thessalonica. And the specific evidence that Paul presents is the common suffering for their faith. All Christians – Jews and Greeks, ancient and modern, Asian, Anglo, Hispanic, and Black – all Christians suffer for their faith. Jesus tells us why this is the case. Just before He was crucified He told His disciples that this would happen, and it is because we are enemies of the world. The world – the Bible’s term for society without the presence of the Holy Spirit – is opposed to us. Sin not only corrupts individuals, it also corrupts societies. Like individuals, societies display the glory of God’s image, but they are also corrupted by sin. So the world is both glorious and evil. And that resident evil is opposed to the perfectly holy Son of God, and to all who follow Him.

Christians err in two ways as we live in this world. Most of us do not like persecution, so we tend to compromise our faith to get through life more easily. Some, however, provoke the world into even more hostility. This is wrong. Jesus calls us to love those in the world even as we challenge the world’s values. You may have heard it said by some zealous Christians that if you are not being persecuted, your faith is not sincere. There is actually some truth in this. Jesus said, “Woe to you when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.” (Luke 6:26) But this is not the whole picture. Even for Jesus, there were times and places when everyone spoke well of Him. Jesus’ statement has to be taken in the context of all of life. We might expand it by saying, “Woe to you when all people everywhere in all circumstances through all of your life speak well of you all the time.” There may be seasons in your life in which most of your friends and neighbors actually like you pretty well. But if it is true that the world hates us because it hates Jesus, there is no way you will get through life without receiving some of that hatred. And when that happens, that is proof that God’s word is working in you

There are places in this world where persecution against Christians is endemic. Almost every week you can read about the murder of Christians and burning of churches in places like Nigeria, Egypt, and Pakistan. In much of the world it is dangerous to confess Christ. But in much of the rest of the world it is actually pretty safe to be a Christian. Here in the U.S.A. the government has been increasingly hostile to Christian faith, but this is still generally a safe place for Christians. The hostility of the world we experience is much more likely to come from refusing to live by the values of those around us. Sometimes our worst opponents will be other Christians who are living more like the world than like Christ.

When I felt God calling me to leave a career in genetic research to enter full-time ministry, I was uneasy about how my parents would react. I was grateful when they supported my decision. But when my classmate Larry chose to quit his fine job as a chemist to enter the mission field, it was his own Christian parents who tried to stop him. I just received an email update from K and K who are living in an undisclosed location. They are a Korean-American couple who have learned Farsi and are beginning a ministry to Persians. It is not safe to disclose where they are living, but they are committed to serving God in a Muslim culture. What about you? Would you go to someplace like Pakistan if God called you to go? Would you turn your back on a good job at Google or in medicine to build up the church in a Muslim country? And would your friends and family support your decision?

Jenna was the concert master in the Lehigh University orchestra. Jenna is a faithful, devoted Christian, but the orchestra conductor held some rehearsals on Sunday morning. It is not Jenna’s nature to challenge authority, but here was conflict between God’s call to worship and the obligations of the orchestra. It was not easy, but she spoke to the conductor and pointed out that scheduling rehearsals on Sunday morning presented a conflict for Christians. In this case, the conductor was receptive to her request for change, but sometimes the world will not accommodate Christian values. What do you do when the world attempts to force you into its own value system?

One thing is true at all times in all cultures – Christians will stand out. We are not called to wear funny clothing or reject technology or other features of the society around us. But when we are faithful to Jesus, we will not live like those who are not faithful to Him. Jesus says the most distinguishing feature of Christian faith is love for others. Do you stand out by your love for those around you? Do you care to? Is loving and serving Jesus more on your mind than grades, career, earning potential, and a mate?

### *Accepting God's Word*

The main point Jesus is making in this passage is the divine nature of the word of God. God's word is a personal message from your creator, redeemer, and lover. It is powerful to change you into the likeness of Jesus, and it will distinguish you from the world. The point of this passage is not that you must believe this in order to receive God's blessings. No. God will use His word to bless you regardless of what you think. But if you do not accept God's word as God's word, you will bring much trouble on yourself.

When my diesel powered car runs low on fuel, I need to put more diesel fuel in it. If I do not, it will not cease to be a car, but it will not run. When I pull up to the diesel pump, my friend may cry out that this is not a gas pump. True enough. But gas is not what my car needs. It runs on diesel fuel. My friend is doubtful. He has never seen a diesel powered car. He might even think I am dangerously wrong about this. He may try desperately to persuade me to put gasoline in the tank. But you know, it does not matter if I succeed in convincing him that the car needs diesel fuel. His opinion does not change anything. All that matters is that I put diesel fuel into the car. The real problem arises when I lend him my car, and he decides that it will go faster and drive better if he mixes gasoline with the diesel. It will run poorly on this foul mixture, and the problem is not with the car or the fuel, but with my friend's refusal to believe the owner's manual.

God is telling you that the message from Paul and the other scripture writers is the word of God. It does not matter if you have doubts, or even if you do not believe this. It is true regardless of what you think. If you put the word of God into your life, it will change you. If you do not receive God's word, you will not cease to be God's child, but you will run dry and lose your spiritual vitality. But if you put other stuff into your life – if you fill up your mind and heart with the words of other gods – you will run poorly. The apostle Peter says, "Like newborn infants, long for the pure spiritual milk," (1 Peter 2:2) and that milk is the word of God. Keep your fuel pure. Do not look for other nourishment or other comfort. It will only foul up your life. Trust God. His word will change you. Drink deeply from it.

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