

RECEIVING GOD'S WORD

1 Thessalonians 1:5-7

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You became imitators of us and of the Lord, for you received the word in much affliction, with the joy of the Holy Spirit, so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia (1 Thess. 1:6-7).

In 1 Thessalonians 1:5-10, Paul sketches three movements of the gospel as it progressed in Northern Greece. In verse 5, he says “our gospel came to you.” Then, in verse 6, “you received the word.” Finally, Paul says in verse 8 that “the word of the Lord sounded forth from you.” This is the gospel progression that has continued throughout the church age and that God intends for the gospel to follow in our lives as well. Most important was the second of these events, the Thessalonians’ reception of the gospel, recorded in verses 5-7. Paul notes four features of how these believers received God’s Word: 1) they received it through men; 2) they received it from God; 3) they received in great affliction; and 4) they received God’s Word so as to become a model for other believers to follow.

A WORD RECEIVED THROUGH MEN

Paul refers to the message about Jesus Christ as “our gospel” (1 Thess. 1:5). This does not mean that Paul claimed to be the author or origin of the doctrines he taught. Nor did he believe the gospel’s success depended on his own strength or ability. He will frequently refer to it in this letter as “the gospel of God” (1 Thess. 2:2, 8, 9) and “the gospel of Christ” (1 Thess. 3:2). Paul’s gospel was not about himself but about God and his Son Jesus and the salvation they offer by grace and through faith. It was Paul’s gospel, however, in that Paul was relying on it for his own salvation. It was also a message that had been entrusted to him. When Christ converted Paul on the Damascus Road, Jesus said: “he is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the children of Israel” (Acts 9:15).

Christians today have not received the apostolic office, but we have all been inducted into Jesus' Great Commission: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (Mt. 28:19-20). Like the apostles, will be effective in spreading the gospel to the extent that we rely on the good news of Jesus for our own salvation and embrace our calling to spread it to others.

Paul makes clear that being an authentic messenger of the gospel is important to its being received in the world. He writes: "You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake" (1 Thess. 1:5). It is obvious that Paul became personally involved in the lives of the people, since he can state that they well know his character and spirit. Paul said that he ministered "among you," so that they could assess in his life the credibility of his message.

Today, increasing percentages of Christians attend churches that are so large that few of them have personal contact with their pastors. Many other Christians depend on media personalities who they may never meet in the flesh. When such preachers are faithfully proclaiming God's Word much good will be done. A more biblical model, however, involves heralds of the gospel whose lives are known personally by those to whom they are preaching. Christian leaders will never be perfect, but there should be a general correspondence between their message and the pattern of their lives.

Moreover, it should be obvious that ministers of the gospel are motivated not for personal gain but, as Paul writes, "for your sake" (1 Thess. 5:7). Some people are reluctant to receive God's Word from the preacher's lips until experience demonstrates his love and sincerity in ministry, after which people will receive even hard teachings from his trusted lips. Peter's injunction to elders sets the model for preachers and evangelists who would earn the trust of their hearers: "shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock" (1 Pet. 5:2-3).

Paul's emphasis on the credibility of the human witnesses applies not only to pastors and elders but to every Christian. The reason is that

the evidence of the gospel in our lives provides an important commendation of our witness to the gospel. John MacArthur writes:

Most people do not come to Christ as an immediate response to a sermon they hear in a crowded setting. They come to Christ because of the influence of an individual... In the overwhelming majority of [new believers' testimonies], they tell us they came to Christ primarily because of the testimony of a coworker, a neighbor, a relative, or a friend... There's no question that the most effective means for bringing people to Christ is one at a time, on an individual basis.¹

This means that the individual sincerity, godliness, and love of every Christian is important to the spread of the gospel and the salvation of the lost. Tim Shenton writes: "There is no point in preaching the truth if we are living a lie."² However, if we live the truth in sincerity we will provide a compelling testimony to accompany our witness.

A WORD RECEIVED FROM GOD

Paul, together with Silas and Timothy, was a vital agent in bringing the gospel to the Thessalonians. It was not his, however, but God's Word that they received in faith. In his many letters, Paul insists that a divine message was committed to him directly by the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ. He insisted to the Galatians that he was "an apostle – not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal. 1:1). He amplified to them: "I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11-12). 1 Thessalonians 2:13 makes the same claim: "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." Paul uses a term that means to welcome a treasured guest into our home. Paul might have said, "You embraced the Word to your heart" by receiving it gladly with faith.

¹ John MacArthur, *Twelve Ordinary Men* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 68-69.

² Tim Shenton, *Opening Up 1 Thessalonians* (Leominster, UK:Day One, 2006), 20.

The Bible teaches that the prophets and apostles received God's Word by means of *inspiration*. Inspiration does not speak to the inspiring character of the message or the effect of God's Word in a fervent, believing heart. Instead, inspiration refers to the process by which the Holy Spirit conveyed God's Word to his chosen messengers. Paul's classic statement on inspiration says: "All Scripture is breathed out by God" (2 Tim. 3:16). As he puts it, we might better speak of the *expiration* of Scripture rather than its *inspiration*, since Paul says that God's Word is "out-breathed." God's explanation given in Isaiah paints the same picture: "For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth" (Isa. 55:10-11). Peter added that "no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit" (2 Pet. 1:21). As a result of divine inspiration, the apostles' message is the very Word of God, delivered orally to the first Christians and written down for us.

Since Paul's gospel was not a human but a divine message, we only truly receive the Scriptures when we receive them as God's Word. John Calvin wrote: "the Holy Scripture will never be of any service to us, unless we [are] persuaded that God is the author of it... Therefore the Holy Scripture will be lifeless, and without force, until we know it is God [who speaks] in it, and thereby reveal[s] His will to man."³

To receive the Bible as God's Word is to bow before its sovereign *authority*. Some people complain that evangelical Christians worship the book instead of God. This is a false charge once we recognize that God wrote the book in order to aid us in living before him in faith. If a king leaves instructions before he goes away, it is hardly rebellion for his servants to pay careful attention to what he has written, and the king will surely reward those who have kept his word when he comes. Likewise, Christians are to embrace the Bible to our hearts as the divine mandate for our faith and life, because it is the Word of God. "Our wisdom," Calvin taught, "ought to be nothing else than to

³ John Calvin, *The Mystery of Godliness* (Morgan, PA: Soli Deo Gloria, 1830, reprint 1999), 131.

embrace with humble teachableness..., whatever is taught in Sacred Scripture.”⁴

Receiving the Bible as God’s Word also means accepting its *inerrancy*, receiving it as without error in all that it teaches and affirms. We believe the Bible’s inerrancy not because we can harmonize every apparent discrepancy but because it is the Word of God and therefore is perfect. Martyn Lloyd-Jones comments: “The Christian faith is not what *I* think or what anybody else thinks; it is what is plainly taught in the Scriptures. The Christian church is established on the foundation of the apostles and prophets... The moment people begin to stand in judgment upon it and say, ‘This is not true, I accept that but I do not accept this,’ then they have substituted their authority, and what they think, for the teaching of the Bible.”⁵

We further rely on the Bible’s *power* as God’s Word. Paul said, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16). Martin Luther wrote: “We must make a great difference between God’s Word and the word of man. A man’s word is a little sound, that files into the air, and soon vanishes; but the Word of God is greater than heaven and earth, yea, greater than death and hell, for it forms part of the power of God, and endures everlastingly.”⁶

Because the Bible is authoritative, inerrant, and powerful, the Christian is not on a quest seeking after truth. Instead, he has found truth by receiving God’s Word, which he is faithfully to believe and boldly to proclaim.

A great example of one who received God’s Word was Lydia, a business woman in Philippi. Not long before Paul’s ministry to the

4 John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, tr. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1.18.4.

5 D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Love So Amazing: Expositions of Colossians 1*, (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 9-10

6 Cited in James M. Boice, *Foundations of the Christian Faith* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1986), 69.

Thessalonians, he arrived in Philippi on a Sabbath day. He and his friends went down to the river seeking a place to pray, where he found Lydia gathered with other women for prayer. Paul declared the gospel and we read of Lydia: “The Lord opened her heart to pay attention to what was said by Paul” (Acts 16:14). Here we have both the divine and human side of receiving God’s Word. It is the Lord alone who can open the heart, so that faith in God’s Word is a sovereign act of saving grace. The effect is that we not only affirm God’s Word but “pay attention” to it with the greatest diligence. This is the way for us also to welcome God’s Word, by giving it our full attention, believing all that Scripture teaches, and putting in action all that we are taught by God in his Word.

A WORD RECEIVED IN AFFLICTION

Paul notes that in receiving God’s Word, the Thessalonians “became imitators of us and of the Lord” (1 Thess. 1:6). Discipleship is learned by imitating the example of those who have gone before us. Paul does not hesitate to tell new believers, “Be imitators of me.” He can humbly urge this because he goes on to say, “as I am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). If mature Christians can sincerely tell new converts, “Watch what I do and how I live,” then we will be greatly used by God in helping fellow believers to walk in faith. G. K. Beale writes: “As we become more conformed to the image of Christ, we are to live in such a way that others would be influenced by our lives and so become conformed also to Christ’s image.”⁷ Likewise, those who have believed in Jesus are then called to replace sinful and worldly patterns in their lives by imitating biblical patterns that they see being lived out in the church around them.

Paul was not claiming spiritual perfection in urging his readers to mimic him. His example, rather, was in receiving God’s Word himself as he urged them to do as well. Those who teach the Bible should be its most eager students. We should be able to urge others to believe all that is taught in Scripture by ourselves receiving the whole counsel of God in obedient faith. We should model a life that is growing in the truth and that delights in God’s Word so that others

⁷ G. K. Beale, *1-2 Thessalonians*, IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 2003), 58.

will do the same. This calling is just as important for parents as it is for pastors. It should be evident by those who are following our example that we believe the Bible to be the holy, inerrant and life-giving Word of God so that we revere it, study it, and obey it in sincere faith.

Paul emphasizes that his readers followed his example not only in receiving the Word but also in believing in the context of “much affliction” (1 Thess. 1:6). The Thessalonians had suffered violent persecution with the possibility of imprisonment and death. Being “jealous” over Paul’s success in that city, the Jewish leaders organized a mob to raise an uproar. The throng came to one of the new Christian leaders, Jason, in whose house the church seems to have been meeting. They dragged Jason before the civil authorities on the false charge that they were “acting against the decrees of Caesar” and setting up Jesus as a rebel king (Acts 17:7). Later in this letter, Paul will commend his readers for suffering “the same things from your own countrymen” as the Christians in Jerusalem suffered from the Jews, “who killed both the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out, and displease God and oppose all mankind” (1 Thess. 2:14-15).

Paul had himself suffered very great afflictions through his service to Christ (see 2 Corinthians 11:23-30), and now by imitating him the Christians were suffering similar trials. Ultimately, our example in suffering is Jesus himself. Peter wrote that “to this you have been called, because Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, so that you might follow in his steps” (1 Pet. 2:21). We are especially to follow Christ’s manner of suffering: “He committed no sin, neither was deceit found in his mouth. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten, but continued entrusting himself to him who judges justly” (1 Pet. 2:23).

The word Paul uses for “affliction” (*thlipsis*) refers to severe pressure being applied to an object. The verb was used of pressing grapes in a wine-press until they burst. Therefore Paul is speaking of great trouble that results in serious harm. Christians in the West today are most likely to suffer social rejection, the loss of valued relationships, or the limiting of career prospects because of our faith. But Christians should always realize more severe suffering may result from our salvation. Geoffrey Wilson comments: “It was never Paul’s practice to portray an easy road to heaven, for he knew that all who became

imitators of the Lord are called to share in the rejection which He met from an unbelieving world.”⁸ In teaching this, Paul was again following Christ’s example, who said, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it” (Lk. 9:23-24).

What particularly distinguished the early Christians, like the apostles whose example they followed, was the joy they experienced in the midst of tribulation. They would have heard of Paul and Silas’ experience in Philippi, not long before coming to Thessalonica. The two preachers had been unjustly arrested and beaten severely by the civil authorities. They were then placed in a cell with their feet fastened to stocks. Most people would feel despair in such a situation, but Paul and Silas rejoiced: “About midnight Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to God, and the prisoners were listening to them, and suddenly there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were unshaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone’s bonds were unfastened” (Acts 16:25-26). Christians who rejoice amidst afflictions today unleash a similar power, as those who witness the power of the gospel are often made eager to embrace Christ for themselves.

The Holy Spirit is the key to knowing joy in the midst of trials, which is why Paul says his readers exhibited the “joy of the Holy Spirit” (1 Thess. 1:6). This is not to say that Christians never feel grief or walk in spiritual shadows. But even with tears on our cheeks we can access a joy that comes from above. The key is to take our grief to the Lord and receive the peace and joy that only he can give. The question is this: as you suffer afflictions, are your eyes on the world and all that you have lost or are they on the beauty and glory of Christ and all you have gained in him? The answer will make all the difference in how you respond to difficulty.

I noted earlier that the word Paul uses for affliction was also used for the crushing of grapes in a wine-press. Just as this process was performed in order to make wine, it is God’s design that our afflictions

⁸ Geoffrey B. Wilson, *New Testament Commentaries*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2005), 2:138.

would bring out a spiritual joy from our lives as we draw close to Christ, who suffered for us and who sends the Spirit to his suffering people. In this way, it is often precisely in our afflictions that Christians experience the most precious joy. John Lillie describes it as a “joy that springs only from His presence and operation in the soul, and which, perhaps, is never in this world so pure, and deep, and full, as when a man is enabled to suffer faithfully for Christ’s sake and the gospel’s.”⁹ Rejoicing in Christ amidst afflictions is so important that it was the very last subject that Jesus addressed before leaving the upper room on the night of his arrest: “In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world” (Jn. 16:33).

A WORD RECEIVED AS AN EXAMPLE

The complaints made by the world against Christians will often be our highest compliment. So it was for Paul and his companions. When the Thessalonian mob came to Jason’s house looking for the apostle, their accusers described them as “these men who have turned the world upside down” (Acts 17:6). This is exactly what Christians are trying to do! How did Paul and his friends have such a mighty impact despite their earthly weakness? They did it by preaching the gospel in God’s power so that it was received by those who heard. They further impacted the world through the joy of the Holy Spirit that shined through their afflictions. We now have the privilege of following their example in having this effect on our world.

Paul’s formula for the gospel’s spread is for Christians to receive God’s Word in imitation of those who brought it and then to become bearers of the same gospel message so that others may follow the example. Paul rejoiced to report this happening in and through the Thessalonians, saying “that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia” (1 Thess. 1:7).

The word Paul uses for “example” is the Greek word *typos*, which means a model or representation of an object. This calling to model Christian faith is given not only to a few highly educated and gifted

⁹ John Lillie, *Lectures on Paul’s Epistles to the Thessalonians*, Tentmaker Classic Commentaries (Tentmaker Publications, Stoke-on-Trent, UK: 1860, reprint 2007), 52.

Christians but to all believers; it is the thrilling calling that will enable each of us to make an eternal difference, one believer and one church at a time, as we follow Christ and offer ourselves as an example to others.

John Wesley experienced a powerful example of true and living Christianity during his voyage from England to Georgia where he was going to be a missionary. His ship contained a number of Moravians, members of a movement that in the late 18th Century was alive in the gospel. Wesley was astonished by their conduct, describing these often persecuted people as “always employed, always cheerful themselves, and in good humour with one another... they adorned the gospel of our Lord in all things.” During his year in the American colonies, Wesley had regular contact with these Thessalonian-minded believers. After returning to England he reported that they taught him “what I least suspected, that I, who went to America to convert others, was never myself converted to God.”¹⁰ Shortly afterward, Wesley attended a Moravian meeting where justification through faith alone was clearly presented and he believed. He wrote in his journal: “I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone for salvation; and an assurance was given me, that He had taken away *my* sins, even *mine*, and saved *me* from the law of sin and death.”¹¹

Wesley’s experience confirms Paul’s idea of how the gospel spreads. First the word is brought through faithful, credible witnesses. Then God’s Word is received into hearts opened by the Holy Spirit. Rejoicing in the midst of afflictions, these believers model a living faith before the world so that others see, hear the gospel, and by God’s grace are brought to saving faith.

Where are you in this progression? Have you just heard God’s Word for the first time? God calls you to welcome his gospel into your heart through faith, believing that Jesus died for your sins and offers you eternal life. Or have you long since received the gospel in faith? Then draw near to Christ for the joy that will conquer afflictions and

¹⁰ Cited from Iain H. Murray, *Wesley and Men Who Followed* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 2003), 19-20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

enable you to be an example to others. Jesus said, “As the Father has sent me, even so I am sending you” (Jn. 20:21).