

Living with the Word * 1 Thessalonians 2:13

April 21, 2024 * Langford Community Church * Graham Gladstone

There's an important question at the heart of our passage today:

Is the message of Jesus a human invention or is the message of Jesus a divine reality?

Did somebody just make up all of this sin and forgiveness stuff or is the message of Jesus a God-given truth?

The passage of Scripture that we're going to look at today answers that question so join me there – 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 13. 1 Thessalonians 2, verse 13. We're going to focus all of our attention on that one verse today because it tells us something very important about the message at the heart of our faith.

So 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul is thinking back to those days in Thessalonica when he and Silas presented the Gospel message to Jason and Ricky and Secundus and he says -

And we also thank God continuallyⁱ 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 (1Th 2:13 NIV).

First off, I should probably point out that this verse ties directly back to chapter one. Remember, last week, when Paul says 'We give thanks constantly for you' and then he lays out four reasons he's thankful for the Thessalonians? He picks that up again here – 'we also thank God continually because...' And Paul wants us to know three things:

1. The word of God is not man-made.
2. The word of God is God's word.
3. The word of God is at work in all who believe.

Three very important ideas that I'd like to unpack for you but before we get into it, there's another question that we need to ask – what does Paul mean when he says 'the word of God'?

Now I'll be completely honest with you, when I was setting up this series, I was thinking that 'the word of God' meant 'the Bible.' And that's a very reasonable thing to think because the Bible IS the Word of God; time and again the Bible points out that it is God's authoritative Word. And it's true – the Bible is not man-made, the Bible is indeed God's Word and so I was thinking that I was going to be talking with you about the Bible this morning.

But when I got deeper into this verse, it hit me that Paul's not talking about the Bible here. Again, everything he says is true of the Bible, and there's a sense in which we should apply this to the Bible, but when Paul wrote to the Thessalonian church, he meant something other than the Bible when he talked about the word of God. What could it be?ⁱⁱ

One hint is the way Paul talks about this word – 'you received the word of God, which you heard from us' - the implication is that 'the word of God' here is something proclaimed and listened too. So you 'hear' the word of God. That's one hint.

There's another hint in the book of Acts which describes Paul's ministry in Thessalonica.

If you recall, Acts 17 tells us that Paul and Silas got kicked out of Thessalonica and then they went on to a place called Berea where people were much more open to what they had to say. Acts 17 also tells us that when the people who had made such a fuss in Thessalonica found out that Paul and Silas were preaching in Berea, they went to Berea and stirred up trouble there too.

Now it's really interesting to see what Acts 17 says about what they were preaching in Berea. Acts 17:13 says: "When the Jews in Thessalonica learned that Paul was preaching *the word of God* at Berea, they went there too." Paul was preaching or proclaiming 'the word of God' at Berea. Acts 11, 12, 13, 18 all describe telling people about the crucified and risen Saviour the same way – as proclaiming 'the word of God.' In the book of Acts 'the word of God' means 'the message of Jesus,' the Gospel.

When Paul writes to the Thessalonians that they 'heard the word of God,' he means that they heard how God had sent His Son into the world to seek and save His lost sheep and bring them home to Him. I think that we can broadly say that when Paul says 'the word of God,' he means 'the Gospel' or 'the message of Jesus,' that is, that Jesus came to seek and save the lost.

So, to bring it back to our passage, Paul says three things about this message. 1. The word of God is not man-made. 2. The word of God is God's word. 3. The word of God is at work in all who believe.

Let's take those one at a time.

First, the word of God is not man-made. The message of Jesus is not made up.

Frankly, if I was to make up a message and try to find followers, I think I'd make it way less humbling and way more appealing. Let's face it – we follow a crucified Saviour who wins by losing. To follow Him, we have to humble ourselves to admit our need for Him. The one who saved us tells us 'in this life you will face troubles.'

If I was going to 'make up' a word from God, I think I would make it a lot more like the prosperity preachers that you see in the world today. Like, 'if you would just give to my ministry, God will bless you the way He has blessed me with my fancy clothes and fancy jets and a fancy mansion.'

Paul himself in his letter acknowledges that there were people like that in his day, trying to gain followers and make money by means of flattery or greed or impure motives – that's chapter 2, verses 3 and 5. And Paul also points out that by presenting this message (that Jesus came to seek and save the lost), he faced suffering and insults and constant danger (verses 1 and 2). If the message Paul was presenting was made up and causing all this hardship, don't you think that he'd change the message pretty quickly?

He didn't though because the message was not his to change. The Word of God is not man-made. The message is God's word.

And you can see that from the experience of the Christians in Thessalonica and from this letter. Think back to Acts 17; how did Paul introduce the message about Jesus to the soon-to-be Thessalonian Christians? By using the written word of God. Paul took his listeners into the Old Testament to say 'See,

God has promised this suffering Saviour who would redeem His people and now He has sent His Saviour and that Saviour is Jesus.’ Paul wasn’t creating something new in his preaching; he was proclaiming the reality that God was working out His old, old promise.

And the letter Paul wrote – think back to last week – or just look at verse 5 – “...our gospel came to you [and here ‘Gospel’ and ‘word of God’ mean the same thing] not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.”

If this was a man-made message, it would have had to capture people’s attention on its own. It would have had to rely on entirely upon the speaker’s talents as a showman and salesman and the audience’s vulnerabilities and desires to get something done.

But the message that Paul proclaimed came with this supernatural power, this ‘Holy Spirit power,’ that gripped people’s hearts and convinced them that they truly were hearing from God. God’s Word is not just words on a page; they are words that God Himself speaks into our hearts.

The word of God – the Gospel – the message of Jesus – is indeed God’s Word.

Now I’m going to guess that I haven’t said anything ground-breaking so far; I suspect that you could have told me ten minutes ago that God’s word is not man-made but in fact ‘God-made.’ But Paul takes one more step that we need to think about and remember.

The word of God is at work in those who believe. If you believe, then the message of Jesus is at work in you.

Have you ever stopped to think about that? The living and active word of God is at work in YOU!

I think that probably our instinct is to think of the Gospel as a story, as an explanation of how things are. We hear it like the Thessalonians did, we think carefully about it, we decide if we’re going to receive it with faith or not, we do and then it’s done. ‘The Gospel’ just becomes the opening chapter of our life and faith.

But Paul is telling us here that the message of Jesus continues to work in us even after we’ve believed.

Jeffrey Weima puts it like this: “Much more than a fancy human message that [catches our] fleeting attention for one brief moment in time, the gospel instead is an ongoing source of divine power [continuously at work] in the lives of the [believing] Christians.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The Gospel is not just a story; it is a force at work in our lives.

What does that look like? I think that we see hints of that in chapter one. Remember verse 5, how the good news came with power and the Holy Spirit and deep conviction, enabling the Thessalonians to turn from idols to serve the living God (v. 9)? That was God’s word at work in them, convicting them of sin, opening their hearts to God, enabling them to turn from sin and turn to Him. If you have chosen to follow Jesus, the word of God worked in you to make it possible. That’s one way the message of Jesus works – by bringing us to faith.

Another way is in verse 3 of chapter 1. Remember 1:3 - their "...work produced by faith, [their] labor prompted by love, and [their] endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ?" That was the word of God at work again, reminding them who they had faith in, how they were loved by Him and how great was the hope they had in Him and then it reminded them to do something about it – works, labours of love, endurance as a result. The message of Jesus is not just a story to believe in but a truth that empowers us to do something about it.

The word of God is not the word of man. The word of God is God's Word. And the word of God is at work in you when you believe.^{iv}

So that being the case, what do we do about it? If you have chosen to follow Jesus then the word of God is at work in you; what do we do about it?

Well, on one hand, we don't do anything about it. The word of God just works, alongside the Holy Spirit, without our conscious input. The word of God at work in us shapes our worldview, so that we see the world not through individualist, capitalist, self-centred eyes, but through corporate, spiritual, God-centred eyes. The word of God at work in us sanctifies us, making us more like Jesus in our thoughts and actions. The word of God at work in us helps us to stand up under persecution for our faith – the very next verse after today's verse says that the Thessalonian church bore up under suffering BECAUSE God's word was at work in them, helping them to trust God more than they feared suffering.

In that way, the word of God at work in us is a bit like medicine. When I have a headache, I take a couple of Tylenol; I swallow them down and never think about them again. A little bit later my headache goes away. In the meantime, I'm not sitting there willing the Tylenol to do its work. It does its thing without my input and there's a sense in which the word of God works in us the same way. Paul says it very clearly here – 'the word of God is at work in all who believe' – whether they know it or not. So on one hand, we don't do anything but let the word of God do its work.

On the other hand, I think that we CAN participate with the word at work in us, really we SHOULD participate in the word at work in us and there's two ways I think that we do that.

First is simply to realize that the word of God IS at work. The word of God that shapes your worldview and your outlook on life and the Holy Spirit at work with the word are going to help you to shine a light for Jesus whatever you're doing; you just need to be aware of that and lean into it.

I'll be completely honest, when I go into a hospice, when somebody asks me why I believe what I believe, when I sit down to prepare one of these messages, I don't know what to say. But I consciously remind myself that I'm not alone in this. The spirit of God is at work in me, working within the worldview that the word of God (the Gospel) has shaped in me and so I can know that I will have the words that I need to say when I need to say them. I just need to be aware of it and remind myself that the word is at work even as I'm at work.

But let's be honest. It's one thing to recognize that 'oh, the word of God is at work in me.' It's another altogether to do something about it and that's where the second idea comes in – partner with the word of God at work in you.

Here's the picture in my mind. Our tractors at home on the farm always had a power take off sticking out the back. You'd fire it up and this little stub would start turning and start working. It would just go,

go, go, always at work. But unless you hooked a drive shaft up to it and that to an implement, it wouldn't do anything. You had to tap into that power and partner with it to get it to do something.

And that I think is what we need to do with the word at work in us. The spoken word of God (the Gospel) is vitally important, but it can only go as far as you take it. You need to feed it with the written word of God to grow as a believer. Give it the written word to work with as it builds your worldview and character.

Yes, the spoken word will help you to be more like Jesus, but you have to consciously decide moment to moment to actually put that into action in your living experience with other people.

The word of God can help you to be patient but you actually have to be patient for it to work. Recognize that the word of God is at work in you and partner with the word of God at work in you.

The word of God is not man-made; the word of God is God's own word. Let the word work in you.

ⁱ Now before we get too deep into it, I'd just like to point out to you that this verse connects back to the passage of Scripture that we looked at last week – chapter 1. If you recall, Paul opens up his letter to the Thessalonian church by giving thanks for them and now here in verse 13, he goes back to that theme of thanksgiving and thanks God again for what has happened with the Thessalonian believers.

ⁱⁱ I don't know that I'll be able to work this in naturally into the message, but we should also recognize that Jesus is literally the Word (logos) of God (see John 1) and He is certainly at work in us and through His Holy Spirit.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jeffery Weima, *1-2 Thessalonians* (BECNT), 164.

^{iv} Before we talk about application, let's just pause and revisit our question from the beginning. Is the message of Jesus a human invention, something that people came up with on their own? Or is it divine in original, coming from God Himself. Well, what does the Bible say? It's God's Word, given by God Himself.

^v And just a quick apologetic sidebar here – if anyone ever says to you 'oh, the Gospel is just man-made garbage that the church came up with to control people,' you can say, 'no, it's not.' The Gospel comes to us from God. Generations of Christians have passed it on, sometimes at great cost to themselves; this is not some get-rich-quick scheme that someone came up with. If they say 'it's just a myth or a fairy tale,' you can say 'it's historically attested. Jesus appears in His contemporaries sources, like Tacitus and Josephus. It's rooted in the Old Testament, which is a primary source.' If they say 'what's the point in believing it?' you can say 'it's at work in my heart.' The word of God is at work and will help you to answer these questions.