

PREFACE

The Christian life is a challenging occupation—and not just because our faith is at odds with the world’s system. Even *within* the faith we need to keep our heads about us, using discernment, weighing the validity of what we read and hear. We need to understand what our Bible says, what it does *not* say, and how it says it.

The two verses that follow Jesus’ lengthy Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 7, record the immediate response of the crowd.

Read Matthew 7:28-29.

The scribes were smart, scholarly, well-spoken—and immersed in human tradition. But “Jesus, the anointed One, not only received His words from the mouth of God, like Moses and the prophets, but spoke with the unique authority of the Son who alone knows the Father and who alone can reveal Him” (O. Betz in *Brown*) And the people hearing Him speak, could immediately tell the difference. This “authority” the people recognized but could not accurately explain, was *the Word of God speaking the words of God*—or, more succinctly, *God speaking*.

Because the Greek is the familiar *logos*, the other translations emphasize the oral aspects of the Sermon: “these sayings,” “saying these things.” I think we tend to underestimate the importance of the *spoken* word in God’s economy. After all, how did God create the universe in the first place? He *spoke* it into existence.

Then God said, “Let there be light”; and there was light. (Genesis 1:3)

And throughout the historical epochs recorded in our Bible, God’s word was transmitted orally, verbally, through teachers, preachers and prophets.

THE WORD**Read 1 Thessalonians 2:13.***the word of God*

Let’s begin with what we know and have. I’ve always referred to this as my “junior high” Bible, but it records on the first page that it was given to me by my parents for Christmas 1961, when I was ten years old and still in the sixth grade (last year of grade school), but some of the names recorded in it I only knew in high school. So this was my first personal Bible, and it was with me throughout the tumultuous years of my youth.

It still bears the scars of being tossed into the rear saddle baskets on my bike, and most of us understand that, physically, this is just a book. It is not a holy relic to be kept under glass. It does not glow in the dark, nor do our hands tingle when we pick it up. Rather, it is to be used, to be read, to be studied and written in. When one wears out, we can easily replace it at the nearest Bible bookstore. Most of us have multiple copies of this book, including different versions. Some of us now use it in a form that is not bound, but read from a glowing plastic screen. As such it is just another piece of software—a series of zeros and ones stored in an electronic device.

Even so, the *words* it contains *are* holy. When we hear the phrase, “the word of God,” our first thought is of this book, because it contains the literal words of God, transmitted through men by the Holy Spirit. (Our second thought is of the incarnate Word, as the apostle John referred to Jesus.)

So this book—even this battered and scarred copy from my youth—is the literal word of God. But this is not the “word” mentioned in our text—although it contains some of the same words.

the word of God which you heard from us

At the time of Paul’s missionary journeys, God’s *written* word consisted only of what we would call the Old Testament—both in Hebrew and Greek (Septuagint)—and almost certainly not in one cohesive volume. This was still the time of scrolls; the complete OT would not be “bound” into one volume until the invention of the codex [earliest form of “book” as we know it] in the second century, and lugging around a duffel bag full of individual scrolls comprising the Jewish Scriptures would certainly not have been conducive to Paul’s mobile lifestyle.

Paul writes “the word of God which you heard from us”—literally, “the word of hearing” (*logon akoēs*). What Paul is saying—literally, because this, as most of his letters, were dictated to an amanuensis—is that when he and his fellows were standing in front of the Thessalonians, they were speaking to them *ex cathedra*—literally, “from the chair,” but means speaking accurately, infallibly for God. They were not *reading* the word of God to them, as they would today, but were *speaking* the word of God.

you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, Paul was grateful to God that the message he delivered to the Thessalonians was not just politely listened to, but believed as truth. In this verse he employs two different words that could, generally, mean the same thing: to receive.

we...thank God that when you received [paralambano] the word of God...you accepted [dechomai] it...as the word of God

I like how the venerable W. E. Vine explains the difference: “The former refers to the ear; the latter, adding the idea of appropriation, to the heart.” But listen to the exuberance of Charles Haddon Spurgeon, from his sermon on this text, delivered on March 24, 1887:

The Word is twice mentioned in our version. “When you received the Word of God which you heard of us, you received it.” In the Greek those are two different words altogether. The second, “received,” might, perhaps, better be read, “accepted.” I do not think that I should be straining a point if I read it, “You welcomed it.” They first received it by eagerly hearing it. They wanted to know what it was all about. They were attentive to it and wanted to understand it. When they had heard it, they rejoiced, and said, “Oh, yes, yes, yes, this is the very thing we need!” They embraced it. That word will do—they embraced it! They put their arms around it and would not let it go. They were hospitable to the Gospel and said, “Come in, you blessed of the Lord. Come and live in our hearts!”

Spurgeon continues:

They assented and they consented to the Word of the Lord. They first appreciated the Gospel and then they apprehended it by faith. They were like the man that was hungry in a foreign land and he could not make the people quite understand. But as soon as they brought an article of food which he liked he fell to, directly, and made them comprehend that he would be glad for more of that sort of thing. By his hearty reception of what they brought, the hungry man said plainly, "Bring some more of that." So we have a people about us, thank God, that are looking out for the Gospel! They are always willing to hear it if men will but preach it! And when they do get it, they mean business and feed upon the Word with hearty appetite. How glad I am to feed men that will eat! It is a pleasure, indeed. The spiritually hungry welcome heavenly food—they take it into themselves and receive it as the bread their soul craves! Oh, what a mercy it is when sermons are preached which feed souls and souls hear so as to feed thereon! It is a happy day when a full Christ and empty sinners meet!

How the Thessalonians received the word delivered by Paul is parallel to how some do or do not receive Christ Himself—in fact, that was the result in Thessalonica. Many people hear the words of the gospel; their physical ears hear the sound of the message. For some that's where it ends: just words that bounce off. But some physically hear the words of the gospel, and they *receive into themselves* (appropriate), in their heart, the truth of the message. And Christ Jesus finds a home in their heart.

Just like that crowd that listened so intently at the feet of Jesus, the people in Thessalonica recognized that these were the words of very God. And they took them to heart; these holy words found purchase in their lives—their behavior later gave clear and dramatic witness to their new faith.

THE WORK

Let's set up the second part of our study with what God, through the prophet Jeremiah, had to say about His word.

Read Jeremiah 23:28-29.

Just as we may forget the importance of the spoken word in God's economy, we can also forget the supernatural *power* of that word. Whether in spoken or written form, God says that His word—the *words* of God—contains the consuming, cleansing force of fire [interestingly, the Hebrew word here for fire is *esh* (aysh), which sounds very much like "ash."] and the concussive, crushing force of an industrial sledge that can shatter rock with one blow. *Just His word!* Which follows, of course: If God can speak the world into existence, He can easily speak the destruction of any or all of its component parts.

which also performs its work in you who believe.

But v13 does not speak of the destructive force of His word, but the creative, sustaining, reparative force. This includes a caveat; there is a condition: One must believe; the Holy Spirit must be in residence for God's word to be effectual in a life.

performs its work^{nasb}, **effectively works**^{nkjv}, **at work**^{niv, esv} = *energeitai* = from <G1756> (energes); **to be active, efficient** :- do, **(be) effectual** (fervent), be mighty in, shew forth self, work (effectually in).

This word, in its active voice, always describes supernatural activity, principally God's (Thomas). In noun form it means *power in exercise*, and is used only of superhuman power (Vincent). So the emphasis here is on the kind of work that is beyond our ken, beyond our understanding.

It is impossible to exhaustively list the ways the word works in believer's lives, but Joseph S. Exell speaks of the essentials:

Joseph S. Exell: The Gospel is efficacious in transforming character. As the planet receiving the light of the sun is transformed into an imitation sun, so the believing soul, receiving the light of the Word, is changed into the image of that Word. Whatever the Divine Word prescribes, that it works in us. Does it prescribe repentance?—it works repentance; faith?—it works faith; obedience?—it works obedience; knowledge?—it enlightens to know. Its transforming power is continually demonstrated. It makes the niggardly generous, the profane holy, the drunkard sober, the profligate chaste. Faith is the vital force that connects the soul with this converting power.

Oh, that we would more regularly acknowledge and tap into this power that is in us. As strong and supernaturally powerful as the word is, even in believers the flesh has the ability to ignore it, to stifle it. We can blithely go about our daily lives paying little or no heed to the percolating strength of God's word. There is *so much* God has given us that, sadly, lies dormant because we do not utilize it, we do not nurture it, cultivate it, *live* it—and live *in* it.

I began this lesson with my old "junior high" Bible. This is how we receive God's word today; there are no longer any Pauls, any Peters or Jameses—and certainly no Christ Jesus walking the earth. No one today speaks *ex cathedra*. *This* is how we hear and receive God's word. And if we are not regularly reading, studying, ingesting and living this word, we are cutting off a large portion of our life from God—and even worse, we are cutting off a large portion of God's life from ours.

Let's close with a final word from Spurgeon:

Spurgeon: This Gospel, if it is received as the Word of God, comes with power. Do not let us be misunderstood—the power we mean is by no means a common thing! It is not the force of persuasion, nor the energy of rhetoric. It is Divine Power—the finger of God! There is still in the world a miraculous force—the Divine energy of the Holy Spirit. It does not have us speak with tongues, neither do we hear it in rushing, mighty wind. But it is as unmistakable to those who have it as if it did come with such extraordinary signs!