

What do you do with God's Word?

A plant needs sunlight to grow and bloom. The church can only grow and bloom when it lives from the light of God's Word. As a flower wilts when it has no sunlight, so the church loses its strength and vibrancy when the Word is no longer central and foundational for its life. It is essential for the church to hear the Word and respond to it. We see this in the passage we want to reflect on today.

1 Thessalonians begins with wonderful words. Paul and his helpers are positive about the church in Thessalonica because they recognize the work of God in Jesus Christ. They thank God that in spite of hardship the church at Thessalonica is still functioning well. They said wonderful things about the church, about the faith love and hope at work in the believers. But they do not stop there. They know the root and source of it all is God's work. And therefore in vs. 4 they continue: "We always thank God for you all, because we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you." These are remarkable words. Not only do the apostle and his helper love this congregation, God loves this congregation. He cares for this congregation. God has chosen this congregation. God has set them apart for himself. In fact, this shows his love for them.

To explain this, let's for a moment go to the Old Testament, to Deuteronomy 7. There we meet the same two terms: *love* and *chosen*. The words in Deuteronomy were spoken after the people of Israel had been delivered from Egypt. The LORD God had set them free from slavery. Why did he do this? To make this people his own. He brought them to Mount Sinai and said "*From among all the nations I have taken you. You are my people and I am your God. I am giving you wonderful promises and will bring you to a wonderful land.*" That was God's choice. He set Israel apart from other nations. Why did he choose Israel? Not

because of anything in them, nor of anything they had accomplished. Other nations, such as the Egyptians had accomplished a whole lot more than the Israelites! Then why did he make this people his own? Because he loved them. This Old Testament background we need to keep in mind when we read this passage in 1 Thessalonians. The church at Thessalonica is in a similar situation as the OT Israel. God has set them apart from others, he has freed them from the bondage to sin and gives them the hope of a promised land. Why did he do this? The answer is: his undeserved electing love. What a wonderful truth about this church.

How do Paul and his helpers know this? After all they say “*We know.*” Has God given them a private communication? No. They base their knowledge on facts that can be observed. Two are mentioned in this passage. The first one is what the Word did in their lives. The second is how they responded to the Word.

Let’s start with the first: what the Word did in their lives. “We know God has chosen you - because our gospel came to you not simply in words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” Paul and his helpers had worked in Thessalonica for a few weeks and what had happened? A church had come about! People had come to faith! Acts 17 says: a large number of God fearing Greeks and not a few prominent women. Isn’t that amazing? The Gospel had come not just in words, but in power. That means the preaching of the Word of God showed its power in the conversion of these men and women.

The passage mentions three things about the way the word came to the Thessalonians: it came with power, with the Holy Spirit, with deep conviction. All three are connected. They mean that in and with the Word, the Spirit worked in their hearts and brought about the deeply rooted conviction that this is truth. You see that again it is not humans who are in the centre, as if Paul can point to this congregation as evidence of how skilful or inspiring he is. No, this power is the work of

the Holy Spirit. He uses the Word to break down barriers in hearts, convict minds and so lead people to confession of the truth. What a powerful word it is!

But that is not the only reason why Paul and his helpers know that this church is chosen in God's love. The other reason is what they did with the gospel. Loved by God leads to loving God in return. The Word came to them with power. "As a result you became imitators of us of the Lord." Their lives changed, they copied the way Paul lived. By the way, this implies that Paul's way of living was clear. He gave the right example, as preachers should do. But then, all that Paul and the others did in turn was following Jesus Christ. So really, they were not following Paul or any other apostle; they had become followers of Jesus Christ.

The Bible works this out. "You received the message of the gospel with joy given by the Holy Spirit, in spite of severe suffering." It was not easy for these new believers. There was opposition from within the city. But yet it was clear from their lives that they had joy for the Word. And not only people in their own city noticed this, other churches in Macedonia and Achaia heard about it as well. They even became models to all believers in that region. Others heard about the faith of the Thessalonians. It was so well known, that Paul and his helpers did not have to report it to others for the other churches knew it already before Paul and his helpers arrived. "*Do you know what is happening in Thessalonica?*" And they would tell Paul and the others.

And it was not a general report either! Vs 9 and 10 give the details. "*They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead - Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.*" These believers left their idols and turned to God. They expressed their longing for the coming of the Lord Jesus, because in Christ we are rescued from the coming wrath of God.

What a wonderful testimony of these believers. They are living out their faith. That is the way it should be. Others are speaking about their faith. Now I am quite sure that the Thessalonians did not send messengers out to let the others know what they were doing. Rather it went this way: others saw it, notice it and so the news spreads. The report rang out. Yes, look what it says in vs. 8: “the Lord’s message rang out from you.” Do you see that? It is the Lord message. It is not the message of the Thessalonians. Their response to the Word becomes a message of God. It rang out from them. This is the evidence that you are loved by God and chosen by him. God is at work in you and using you to spread his Word.

A plant needs sunlight to grow and bloom. The church needs the Word of God to grow and bloom. If that Word is not preached faithfully, the church will wilt. It will disappear. It may still have the outward form of a church, but lacks the inner power. But where the Word is preached faithfully, the powerful effect it will be evident in the lives of those who hear it. This is only because of God’s love. Not something we can boast in. Rather what we need to do is receive the Word as what it is, the Word of God. We have to come to the faithful proclamation of the Word and so let the Spirit work in us the renewal of our lives. Then we turn away from our idols and turn to the living and true God. Then we have hope for we know that the blood of Christ rescues us from the coming wrath. Then the message of God will ring out from us.