

Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit.

THE GOSPEL IN POWER.

A Sermon

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“For our gospel came not unto you in word only,” etc., (down to) “from the wrath to come.”—I. Thess. i. 5-10.

A WORKMAN likes to see that he has been doing something. It is very dispiriting if he has spent much toil, and can see no result. God's workmen by faith would continue still to labour, even if they saw nothing come of it; but it is much more comforting, much more easy for them to continue in service when they see that God is blessing them. Now it is not wrong for a Christian minister to speak about the conversions that have been wrought under his ministry, for Paul says that he would have done so, only that others did it so constantly that there was no need of it. Paul, however, would not, under any circumstances, have done a wrong thing, and, therefore, we gather that it is most allowable sometimes that we should see what has been done, and should speak of it, and the more especially because if any good be done by any ministry, it is

God that has done it, and all the glory is due to him, and to him alone. Not to speak of what God has done would be ingratitude. It might have a semblance of humility, but in reality it would be disloyalty to the Most High. Paul, therefore did not hesitate to speak of his converts at Thessalonica, and of their good character, and of the good fruit which they had borne, and the way in which they had spread abroad the gospel. He did not boast; he gave God the glory of it, but he did speak of what had been done. And we think we may do the same; in any measure in which God shall bless our work, any one of us may tell of it to the praise and glory of God, and to the encouragement of our fellow-labourers. Now the Apostle in this passage tells us what God had done at Thessalonica. We will proceed at once, for our text is long—we will proceed at once to the handling of it.

And you will note that he tells us, first, *what he had preached at Thessalonica*; ; then *how it had come to the people*; and, thirdly, *what had been the result of this to themselves*; and, fourthly, *what had been the result of it to other people*. First, the Apostle tells us:—

I. WHAT WAS PREACHED AT THESSALONICA.

He says, "Our gospel"—(note that word)—"Our gospel came not unto you in word only." Why does Paul call it "our gospel"? He did not invent it; he did not think it out, and make it fresh every Sunday. No; it was Christ's gospel long before it was Paul's gospel. Yet he calls it our gospel *by way of distinction*, for there were other gospels. There were those who came and said, "This is the good news!" and others, on the other hand, who said, "This is the good news," but Paul says that there was another gospel, and he adds, "Yet not another; but there be some that trouble you." He, therefore, put down his foot, and he said, "Bring what gospels you like, each of you; but I have a gospel which I preach, distinct from yours, and that gospel it is which I have preached to the Thessalonians, and which has not come to them in word only." In these times, beloved, there must be made a distinction between men's gospel and God's gospel; for nowadays man's gospel is popular enough. Somebody thinks until his head aches, and he gets into nonsense, and then he comes and brings this forward as something fresh. Men go to the bottom of a subject until they stir the mud at the bottom and cannot see their own way themselves, and nobody else can see, and then forthwith they come out with something marvellous and, having used some words that are hard to pronounce and harder still to understand, they earn a cheap name for being great scholars and profound divines. Well, let such go their way; that is their gospel; but we have another gospel from that—one which we have gained in another way, and which we desire to propagate in another fashion. Paul said "our gospel," then, by way of distinction.

But he meant this too. It was his gospel because *it had been committed to him*; he had received it as a sacred deposit; he was, as it were, a steward for God—put into commission to preserve and keep alive the truth in the world; and Paul did keep it unadulterated, so that when he closed his life he could say, “I have fought a good fight; I have kept the faith.” Whoever may have adulterated the gospel, Paul did not. He gave it forth as Christ gave it to him. Oh! that each one of us who is called to preach the gospel, and, indeed, every church member would feel that the truth is committed to us to keep it in the world! Our sires kept it at the stake, and on the cruel rack, and when they went in their chariots of fire to heaven they left the truth to their sons to preserve. Handed down to us in the long line of martyrs and confessors, Covenanters and Puritans, what will we do with it now? Will we not feel that all the cost expended on it in the centuries past demands of us that we should spend the like still, if there be a necessity for it—even our blood—and that, while we live, it shall never be said that in our life, in our prayer, in our conversation, or in our preaching, the gospel suffered anything at our hands? “I know whom I have believed,” said Paul, and “I am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed to him,” or rather, as some read it, “He is able to keep my deposit, that which was committed to me to keep; Christ also will keep and preserve the gospel pure and clear, even until time’s latest hour.” The Lord grant it, for his name’s sake!

But I think the Apostle used the term “our gospel” not only for distinction and because he felt it was committed to his trust, but because *he had enjoyed it himself* and had experienced it. What right has any man to preach that which he has not himself enjoyed and made his own? I have heard of a certain physician who usually tried his own medicines upon himself; and surely this should always be the practice of those that serve the heavenly physician. How shall we come and preach of the Balm of Gilead, which is to heal all wounds, if our wounds be unhealed? What a wretched case must that man be in who talks of regeneration, but is not born again; who preaches faith, but has never believed; who talks of pardon, but has never washed in the precious blood; speaks of the righteousness of Christ, but is shivering in the nakedness of his own corruption! Ah! wretched man, to be a herald of good news, while he himself partakes not therein! Ezekiel, before he had to go and speak of the message of God, had that message given to him, and what was said? “Son of man, eat this roll.” He had to take the message written on the roll and eat it, and when it was in his own body then it was that he could tell it out with great power. It is a good old saying, “If your preaching is to go to the heart, it must come from the heart.” It must first have moved our souls, before ever we can hope to move the souls of others. The Lord is my witness that, in preaching to you here, beloved, these many

years, I have preached to you what I have tasted and handled of the good Word of God. I have preached the doctrine of human sin, for I have felt its power, felt its bitterness and shame, and lain in the dust before God, even in despair. I have preached to you the power of the precious blood to cleanse from sin, for I have looked to Christ's dear wounds and found cleansing there. We have only spoken to you what we have ourselves known, and felt, and proved to be true, and I should go to my chamber this night wretched indeed if I had no other assurance of the truth of my message than that which I could find in the experience of other men. Now many of you are engaged in preaching Christ to others, and in teaching Christ to the children in the schools. Always speak out of the fulness of your own hearts, for when you can say, "I have tried this; I am rejoicing in this," then your word will be pretty sure to come with power to the hearts of those that hear you. The man who desires to bring others to Christ should imitate Elisha, the prophet, who, when he found the child dead in the bed and that it could not be raised to life by any other means, went and put his mouth upon the child's mouth, and his hands upon the child's hands, and his feet upon the child's feet, and then by-and-bye the life was restored to the child. We must feel an inward sympathy with those whom we would bring to Christ, and then must tell out from our own soul what we know about the Saviour, and it will be sure to come with freshness and with power, God, the Holy Spirit, blessing it. This, then, I think, was Paul's reason for calling it "*our gospel*"—the gospel committed to him, and the gospel which he had tasted and handled for his own self personally. Now I shall want you to observe in the second place:—

II. HOW THE GOSPEL CAME TO THE THESSALONIANS.

He describes it as coming in four degrees. First, he says, "It came not in word only, but in power and in the Holy Ghost, and, fourthly, in much assurance." Now these four words enable me to divide the present audience. To all who have been here present, who have been sitting in these pews for any length of time, *our gospel has certainly come in word*; they have all heard it—heard it, too, so as to understand the run, the gift of it. They have heard it in many forms and shapes commending itself to their attention. But, oh! it is to be feared that there are some to whom it has come in word only, and it is indeed to the preacher (and more still it **should be to those who are in such a plight**) **sad that this life-giving Word should be only a word.** There was the gospel feast, and the message was sent, but they who were invited came not to the feast. They heard the message; that was all. Here are sick men lying at Bethesda's pool; they see the water, and that is all; but they step not in, and are not healed. Oh! to lie sick, with healing within reach! To be hungry, and bread hard by! To be thirsty, with the stream flowing at one's foot, and not to drink! Remember,

dear hearers, that if the Word of God comes to you as word only to-day, it will one day be something more than that, for it is an undoubted truth of Scripture that hearers are responsible for what they hear. "Take heed how ye hear!" shall have to be answered for at the day of judgment. "Ye heard the gospel, but ye rejected it!" shall be one of the charges brought against those who listened to it, and it shall be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon than it shall be for such. I would like to divide the congregation now upon this question, "How many are there here now to whom the gospel has come in word only?" Let conscience speak; let each man put his hand upon his heart and answer, "Is that my case?" If so, may it not be your case any longer, nay, not a single day longer, but may the Word come to you in another way!

But there were, secondly, *some to whom it came in power*. Now there are hearers to whom the gospel comes with an arousing power. They used to be careless, but they cannot be now. They hear the word "Eternity! eternity! eternity" ringing in their ears, and it startles and awakens them. They cannot be at ease while they are at enmity with God; they feel that their nest is stirred up. It has come with power to them. More than that, there are some to whom the Word has come with crushing effect; it has smitten them down; it has bruised their righteousness; it has dashed to shivers their hopes of themselves; and though they have not looked to Christ for the true hope, yet they feel the power of the gospel, which lays all other hopes in the dust. Ah! I know some of you have felt the power of the gospel, for you went home and prayed, perhaps a score times—after hearing the sermon, you have gone up to your chambers, and you have begun to pray, but the next morning you have forgotten. Your goodness has been like the morning dew, and has melted when the heat of the day's cares has come upon it. Alas! alas! alas! in many a furrow we have sown in vain. We have cast the seed on stony ground; we have thrown it on the highway side, and we have lost our pains; nevertheless, we are to continue still to preach the gospel, for in some it will come with a greater power than this.

Again, I would entreat another division of the house. I know there are some who will come under this head. They are not saved, but still they cannot ridicule it: they cannot pass it off with indifference. It is like a sharp two-edged sword; it pierces, and cuts, and wounds. I pray God it may kill them spiritually, that they may yet be made alive.

Now the third degree of the coming of the Word to Thessalonica was that *it came in the Holy Ghost*. Ah! here is the blessed way; for if it shall come in any other power than this, it will come in vain; but if it come in the Holy Ghost, oh! then, then its end is achieved, for the Holy Ghost quickens men by a mysterious operation, which we cannot describe, but which some of us have felt, which comes upon men and creates in them a new life, and whereas

they were dead in sin they begin to live as they lived not before. That same Spirit then enlightens them, showing a thousand truths in a light in which they never saw them before; they find they have entered into a new world; they have passed from darkness into marvellous light. Then the Spirit of God begins to purify them. He purges them from this sin and that, and he refines, renews them; he is in them as a spirit of burning, consuming sin—a cleansing spirit purging them from unrighteousness. Then he comes as a consoling spirit, and gives them joy and peace, uplifts them above their cares, their temptations, their doubts and fills them with a preface of eternal bless. Oh! blessed is that man to whom our gospel comes with the Holy Ghost. Beloved, we do not wonder if persons sneer at the gospel in itself, or if others hear it and are unaffected by it, for the gospel in itself is like a sword without a warrior's arm to wield it. But when the Spirit of God comes, man is a doubter no longer. When he lays home the truth he cuts so to the diving of soul and spirit, joint and marrow, that men are convinced, converted, saved, and the truth is to them indeed a living thing. Pray, O beloved members of this church, pray that the Word of God, even our gospel, may come with the Holy Ghost.

But there was a fourth class to whom the Word came in a yet higher degree; for it is added "*and with much assurance.*" To all Christians it comes with the Holy Ghost, but to some with a still greater degree of spiritual power. They believe the gospel, but they do not believe it timidly; they accept it as a matter of firm, solid, indisputable fact; they grasp it as with an iron hand, and their own interest in it does not remain a question. No; they know whom they believe, and are persuaded that he is able to keep that which they have committed to him. They believe in Christ with the faith of Abraham, which staggered not at the promise through unbelief. Clouds and darkness have gone away from their sky, and they see the clear blue ether of God's own presence above them. They rejoice in the Lord always, and again they do rejoice. There are some such in this house; I bless God for every one of them. May there be many more; for you that possess full assurance are the men that are strong for service. Having the joy of the Lord in your own souls, it becomes your strength as you go forth to fight the Master's battles, because you feel the Master's love. The Lord give us many, many such in the church, to whom the Word of God shall come with the Holy Ghost and with much assurance. Now this is how the Word of God came to them. I must pass on to the third point, and that is:—

III. WHAT HAD BEEN THE RESULT OF THIS IN THEMSELVES?

You will kindly observe that the Apostle says first, "Ye became followers of us and of the Lord." A man when he is at first converted is not fit to be a leader; he has to be a *follower*. We do

not take raw recruits and make them captains; they must be drilled; they must go into the rank and file a bit. So one of the first things that grace does is to make a man a disciple, that is, a learner, and then he sees in God's Word what his life and conduct should be, and, looking about him, he sees some whom God has blessed with his grace whose life and conduct is according to the Word, and he follows God's servants—not slavishly; he draws a distinction between them and their Master, and only follows them so long as they keep company with their Lord. "Ye became followers of us and of the Lord." Brethren, I know that many of you here present, when the Word of God came to you, became followers of holy men. If you heard of any good action, you desired to imitate it. If you read any biography that told of noble deeds, you aspired to emulate such deeds. And when you read the character of your Lord and Master in the four Evangelists, you asked that you might have grace to live a life of self-sacrifice, of devotion to God, and of philanthropy to men. Well, this is no mean work of grace when a man is brought to be a follower of that which is good.

At the same time he tells us that these people *received the Word of God* "in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost." I do know that there are some in this house who, when they received the gospel, had to suffer for it, but they rejoiced to do so. From the day in which they put on Christ publicly they were jeered; they became subjects of derision. Brethren, some have gone back from us because they could not bear the perpetual taunt, but others of you have been kept by the grace of God and made able to bear any stigma or any sneer. And, indeed, is it not a small thing to bear the jests and jeers of men if the heart be right towards God? What care we—what should we care though all men point the finger and should hiss because of it? Be true to God, believer, and to thy conscience too, and thou mayest well receive the Word "with joy of the Holy Ghost," even "in much affliction." This is one proof of every Christian minister's ministry, when he can point to a people who have become followers of that which is good, and have continued to follow when they have been made to suffer for it.

But it appears that these people at Thessalonica went farther. They grew out of being followers in some sense and, therefore, *became leaders*. "So that ye were examples to all believers in Macedonia and Achaia." Now it is a very easy thing for a Christian to be an example to a sinner. He ought to be, and he is not a Christian if he is not. I won't give twopence for your religion if you do not set a fair example to the ungodly. But it is a higher degree of grace when a man becomes an example even to Christians—when he is such a believer that others may look upon him as the typical Christian, for that is the word used here—may regard him as the type of what a Christian ought to be. Paul says that some of those degraded idolaters to whom he had preached the gospel

first followed him and the Lord, and afterwards grew in grace, so that they stood in the front rank and became an example to believers. Let me hold this up, beloved, to your emulation. Let none of us be content to be according to the ordinary cold Christianity of this age. What cold, poor stuff it is! If the Lord himself should come, would he find faith in the earth? Where is the zeal of the days gone by? Where is the ardour, where is the courage of the ages that have gone? If these things be found nowhere else, O my brother, seek to have them in your own soul. Ask God, if you are compelled to see others decline, that you may not decline yourself, for God's grace can make you an example to the rest of his people. There are such here to-night of whom I might speak—only the Lord bless them and keep them as they are—for I have seen apostolic Christianity here. If I have seen it nowhere else, I have seen it here among some of my brethren and sisters here present, whose service for the Lord shall be remembered in the day of account. They wish it not to be known here, nor will it be, but they have, with tears and prayers, devoted themselves to Christ, and served him well, and he will remember them in that day.

Further, the Apostle goes on to tell us what was done by these Thessalonians, viz., that *they turned from idols*. Oh! that God might turn all of us from every idol that we have! We do not worship gods of wood and stone, but how many professors are there still who worship learning; let them seek it, but let them not worship it. There are some that worship fame; others that worship pleasure. This city is full of idolaters from end to end. When the grace of God comes, it makes men worship the unseen God, and leave their idols to those that choose them. Turning from idols, it appears that these people served the living God. They did not merely acknowledge that he was the living God; but they began to serve him; they put forth their strength in his cause. So will it be among us wherever the Word has come with the Holy Ghost; we shall spend and be spent in the service of our Creator and Redeemer.

And he adds that *they waited for the coming of the Lord*. Oh! this is a high mark of grace, when the Christian expects his Lord to come, and lives like one that expects him every moment. If you and I knew to-night that the Lord would come before this service was over, in what state of heart should we sit in these pews? In that state of heart we ought to be. If I knew that I should see my Lord ere another sun should rise, how would I preach? I ought to preach just in that way as though he were sure to come at once, and there could be no doubt about it. We should hold very loosely by the things of this world if we knew that Christ was speedily coming; so loose we ought to hold by them. We should care but little for the discomforts of life if we knew that it would all be over and Christ would come very shortly; so little ought we to think of life's discomforts. Blessed is that man whose soul is always looking for the coming of the Lord! He may not study texts of

Scripture to know the times and seasons, but if he be ever expecting that his Lord may come at any time, and shall live under the feeling of that belief, and in the power of it, he will be the holy man. "What manner of persons," says Peter, "ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness?" Such we desire to be by the power of the Holy Spirit. Thus we have noticed what the grace of God did for the Thessalonians themselves. Now let us mark:—

IV. WHAT WAS THE RESULT OF THIS TO OTHERS?

And here I wish to speak practically to the members of this church. Thessalonica was a seaport. It was also a principal town in Macedonia. Hence, whatever was done in Thessalonica was pretty sure to be known throughout Macedonia and the rest of Greece. If the Church at Thessalonica had been a dull, sleepy Church, as some Christian churches are, it would have lost a fine opportunity of doing good, but being a thoroughly awake Church, really full of God's own power, from that Church was sounded forth the Word of God throughout all Greece, and when the ships left that port they carried the tidings to Asia minor and to other lands, so that Thessalonica became the starting point for the heralds of the cross. Now if there is any place in the world that ought to feel its responsibility, it is London. We are not egotistical, I think, when we say that it is the very heart of the world. Whatever is done here is sure to be known, and an earnest church in London is only what it should be. A church in London of any prominence that is sleepy, and dull, and cold will have a very heavy account to render when the great Master shall come. *The Church at Thessalonica sounded forth the gospel involuntarily*, and also voluntarily. They did it involuntarily, for their very lives spake. If they did not preach, they were so full of faith, and good works, and holiness, that other people talked about it, and the matter was known, and the work of God in the hearts of the Church could be perceived in the lives of the members, and so it went out. Oh! how happy should any pastor be whose people should be so godly, so united, so generous, so persevering, so prayerful, so full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, that everywhere they should be spoken of, and through them, through their conduct, the Word of God should be sounded abroad. See to that, my brethren—see to it. God has placed us where we are observed of many. Give them something to observe worth seeing. With the eyes of a multitude of witnesses upon us, let us run with patience the race that is set before us.

But then the Church at Thessalonica *sent out the Word voluntarily*. I make no doubt that if they had any men among them that could preach the gospel, they bade them go and preach it; and if any went on their travels, whether they were sea captains or merchants that went from place to place, or persons of influence, or whatever they might be, they said to them, "Wherever you go, keep up the propaganda. Preach the gospel; tell out Jesus Christ.

Be, all of you, missionaries." Now in this I can rejoice, and will rejoice, that it has been so among us. At this present moment I suppose that not less than three hundred of our sons that have been borne upon our knees are preaching the gospel while I am preaching here—I mean ministers of Christ preaching the gospel. Besides that, all round these streets are our evangelists preaching at the street corner. There ought to be more of them. Some of you that come to hear me on Sunday nights ought not to come. If you have got the grace of God in your heart, come and get enough spiritual meat to feed you, but remember that London is perishing for the lack of the gospel. How dare you, then, sit still to enjoy the gospel while men are perishing? There are lodging-houses that are accessible; there are halls, large and small; there are the street corners; there are all sorts of places where Jesus can be preached. Oh! let us labour with all our might to make him known throughout the length and breadth of this great city. At this moment we have our sons, the sons of this church, preaching in Australia, in America—abundance of them there—preaching the gospel of Christ—in the islands of the Pacific—all through every portion of our Dominions. God be thanked that there are so many; but there ought to be many more. I propound as a theory, not that a Christian man ought to say, "Am I called to preach the gospel?" but that he ought to say, "Am I excused from preaching the gospel?" The old plan was for young men to preach before the Church to see if they could preach. I think we must bring them all up to make them prove that they cannot preach. Now Mr. Oncken has been blessed in Germany, as you know, to the raising of many Baptist churches, and he always works upon this theory:—Every member of the church must say, when he comes in, what he can do. If he says he cannot do anything, and he be old, and infirm, and bed-ridden, very well, he can serve God by patient suffering; but if he has any ability, and says, "I cannot do anything," then the reply is, "You cannot come into the church." We cannot have any drones; we must have all working bees in the hive. I think it would be a good resolution for the Tabernacle to expel every member that is not doing something or other for the Lord Jesus Christ. I am afraid some of you would have to go. Well, we won't move that resolution, but we will move another, viz., that every member who has been a drone up till now shall pray to be a bee; that everyone who has done nothing shall ask the Lord to help him to begin; that those who have done half as much as they could will do the other half; and that those who are doing all they can will always try to do a little more, for it is always that point of doing more than you can do that, in the long run, is the best kind of doing, for then you have to lean upon God's strength when you have gone to the limit of your own, and there is the point where the results are pretty sure to follow. I ask the prayers of the dear brethren who have been with us—some of them

sixteen and seventeen years in this service—that God would not stay his hand in our midst; that as he has multiplied us to an unexampled company of some 4,500 persons or thereabouts in membership, that he may give us unexampled grace; that our zeal and earnestness, and enthusiasm may be in proportion to the number; and that the success achieved for God may be commensurate with the responsibilities laid upon us. I sound the clarion again to-night! As God said, “Speak to the children of Israel that they go forward,” so would I speak to you. Forward, in God’s name; forward! The world still lieth in the wicked one. Forward, ye light-bearers! Scatter the darkness. Satan still laughs at God. Forward, with the invincible weapon of the cross, and put him to flight! Now sound your trumpets around the walls of Jericho; continue still to compass it. Now let the trumpet sound, and the wall shall fall flat to the ground by the power of the eternal God. Forward! I hear the angels say it. Forward! I seem to hear innumerable spirits say, beckoning us like the Man of Macedonia, who beckoned Paul across the sea. Forward! The very powers of hell behind us might well drive us on. Forward! The love of Christ within us shall impel us, and let each man and woman here that has been redeemed by blood resolve to-night, in Jehovah’s strength, to do for God and for his truth something more than yet we have thought of, to the praise of the glory of his grace. God bless you, for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

Exposition by C. H. Spurgeon.

I. THESSALONIANS I.

Verse 1. Paul, and Silvanus, and Timotheus, unto the church of the Thessalonians which is in God the Father and in the Lord Jesus Christ: Grace be unto you, and peace, from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Paul is very full of Christ. His heart is full of love to God our Father, and, therefore, it is that twice over in as many lines he mentions both names. He uses no vain repetitions, as the heathen do; but his inmost soul is taken up with communion with the Father and with the Son; and so in one single verse he twice gives us their names.

2-4. *We give thanks to God always for you all, making mention of you in our prayers; Remembering without ceasing your work of faith, and labour of love, and patience of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ, in the sight of God and our Father; Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.*

Paul had a very high opinion of the Church in Thessalonica, and no doubt it deserved it. See how he speaks of it—with such confidence. “Knowing, brethren beloved, your election of God.” Their character was such that he felt sure that he saw the mark of God’s elect about them, and he speaks most positively of them—perhaps more positively than he does of any other church. Well, there were three grand signs. There was