

4. A Faith which Proclaims the Gospel

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] Father, we pray that like those on the Emmaus Road, as we listen to your word, our hearts may burn within us, our eyes may be opened, that you will send us out into the world with the message that the Lord is risen indeed.

Grant us that privilege this evening, Father, as we open your word in your holy name. Amen. I've always felt that one of the most inappropriate and most unhelpful images that's used to describe the Bible is calling it a rule book or a guide book.

You know rule books and guide books have their use, but you could know the highway code backwards and be a dreadful driver. You could have your kitchen full of excellent cookery books and yet produce nothing that anyone wants to eat.

And the reason for that is that the words in the rule books and the guide books have no power to change anything or anyone. But there are words that have power.

Many occasions I've stood and looked into the eyes of a man and woman who were facing me and said the words, I pronounce you husband and wife.

[1 : 27] And these words are effective words. Now they're only effective, of course, because of things that have taken place before that. The relationship that has happened, the legal technicalities worked out, all the arrangements made.

If I were to go down Buchanan Street just now and say to a couple, starry-eyed walking hand in hand, I pronounce you husband and wife. That would not be effective.

These words would carry no power. You see, human words to be effective need to have other things in place. The difference between human words and God's words is that God's words are effective in and of themselves, whether the other circumstances are in place or not.

After all, God's words spoke creation into being. There was nothing and God's words spoke into the darkness and the stars and the planets cascaded into space.

Earth appeared with its teeming life. Jesus Christ stood in front of a grave and said the words, Lazarus, come out. And Lazarus did come out because these were words that had power.

[2 : 38] Look at verse 1 here. Finally, brothers, pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured. Because it is the word of the Lord that unites this chapter.

Sometimes, when I first read this, I thought this chapter looks a bit of a ragbag, a rather disorganised series of phrases, almost as if Paul had forgotten to say a few things and was adding them at the end.

That's certainly not the case. Paul is speaking about the word of God. See, verse 1. Then look at verse 6. We command you, brothers. Now that's Paul speaking as an apostle.

He's not saying, I've got some good advice for you. He's saying, I've got the words of the Lord to pass on to you. And then again, in verse 17. I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand.

This is a genuine letter from me, the apostle. That's what he's saying. So, this is a faith which proclaims the gospel. That's our title tonight.

[3 : 41] A faith which proclaims the gospel. A faith which preaches the word. Now, it's often said that Paul's letters begin with doctrine and then go on to practice.

Many of you will have heard that. For example, the letter to the Romans. We've got the chapters of doctrine about the gospel and about the plan of salvation. And then in chapter 12, therefore, I beseech you to present your bodies a living sacrifice.

And here again, you might think we've had the doctrine that we looked at in the last few weeks about the second coming, the man of lawlessness, and all the associated events. And now we've got the practicalities.

Now, I've never been happy with that way of looking at the letters. Because both the theology and the practicality belong together.

The theology, if you like, the doctrine is given, as Paul says in Romans 12, to renew our minds. Because we'll behave the way we think. We'll behave the way our minds work.

[4 : 45] And if we really grasp the doctrine, if it's really changing us, then we'll live in a particular way. So, since the doctrine of this letter is the doctrine of the coming again of Christ, if we really grasp that, if we are waiting expectantly, then we will indeed be living faithfully.

That seems to me to be the point of the letter. We are waiting expectantly so we can live faithfully. So, let's look at this chapter, then, with this in mind. I want to look at it in three parts.

First of all, spreading the word. Verses 1 to 5. Pray for us that the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured. Finally, is a word the apostle is rather fond of.

In Philippians, somewhat confusingly, he uses it in chapter 3, halfway through the letter. It's never wise when a preacher says finally to assume that they're nearing the end of what they have to say. It's a rhetorical device. It's a pause for breath and so on. Although here there is slightly less to come after the finally. John Stott said a preacher should only use the word finally once.

[5 : 57] And that's almost certainly true. Anyway, finally, says Paul, I want you to spread the word. Or rather, not I want you to spread the word.

That's putting it wrongly, isn't it? Finally, brothers, the word of the Lord may speed ahead and be honoured. The power of the word to make its own swift way throughout the world.

This is derived from Psalm 147. His word runs swiftly. Psalm talks about creation and God's power in creation. And then says his word runs swiftly.

Now, both Roy and Darren said to us today that it's God's work. It's not our work. And in a sense, Paul is saying, sit back. Not sit back and do nothing, but sit back and see how this word has power in itself to change lives, to convert people and to build the church.

Now, we can inform people. We can educate people. We can even, if we have it within us, inspire people. Even get groups of disciples to follow us.

[7 : 06] But none of that is the word of God converting, the word of God changing. Because only the living spirit can take the word of God and use it to change lives, to transform hearts, to make the difference between life and death.

After all, the word of God is the voice that raises the dead. What John says in his gospel about what will happen on the last day, those who are in the graves will hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear will live, is also true of the gospel word, which, when it's heard and believed, does raise people from death to life, bring them from darkness to light.

As we've seen already in our study in Acts, Acts has little to say about church growth. It's everything to say about the word growing. As the word grows, as the word is preached, as word ministries multiply, whether it's from pulpit or in groups, then the church grows.

Now, that being the case, what is our part? If it is the word that does the work, if it is the word that has the power to change, what's our part? And Paul, I think, in verses 1 to 5, says two things.

And we've heard, once again, an awful lot about this today. Brothers and sisters, pray for us. Now, that's always our part. Now, there's a mystery here, isn't there?

[8 : 32] God's work, God's word, sorry, will do its work. And yet, our prayers are part of what he uses to do his work. The work of God must be supported by prayer.

I heard of a minister who was asked, on the way into the church. Will we get a good sermon today? And the minister replied, it will be as good as you've prayed for.

Now, that's clearly not an absolute rule, but it's something worth thinking about. The preaching of the word, whether it's from here, or, as I say, in small groups, or even sharing one-to-one, that needs to be prayed for.

Because, when the word is preached, a battle is going on. Remember the parable of the sower. The sower is sowing his seed. The spirit is at work. But the devil, the enemy, is also at work, sowing doubt, sowing disbelief, sowing fears, sowing all kinds of weeds.

So, the first thing we need to do in the spreading of the word is we need to pray. Pray, finally, brothers and sisters, pray for us. And surely, as I say, that's been the abiding message of today.

[9 : 43] I had no idea, when I prepared this series on 2 Thessalonians, that this last one would coincide with Missionary Sunday. This is an example, I think, once again, of the gracious providence of the Holy Spirit, who brings the living word of God to bear on situations as they arise.

But the second thing we need to do, and this comes in verse 2, you may be delivered from wicked and evil men, for all have not faith. The way I would put this is, we need to be alert and recognise the opposition to the word of God.

Now, that's been a major theme in the letter, particularly back in chapter 2. I want you to look at the phrase at the end of verse 2, which seems a rather trite and rather obvious phrase, for all, for not all have faith.

Now, that's pretty obvious, isn't it? We know that. Why does Paul feel the need to say, not all have faith? I wonder if Paul, since he's been speaking about deception, and he's been speaking about false teaching, and he's been speaking about the way that very often the opposition to the gospel comes, not so much from outside, but from within the church, I think he means internal opposition from people who ought to have faith and don't have it.

I think that fits in better with the general theme of the letter, rather than just an obvious statement, not all have faith. Because opposition to the work of the gospel comes from inside as well as outside.

[11 : 16] We notice that in Acts as well. And often this is a sign that God is at work. 1 Corinthians 16, Paul says, fascinating phrase, a great door for effective work has opened.

If I'd been writing that sentence, I would have gone to say, but there are many who oppose. Paul doesn't. Paul says, a great door for effective work has opened, and there are many who oppose. Almost as if the effective work and the opposition were the size of the same coin. And that's so true, isn't it? When the church shows signs of coming to life, then the devil comes to life as well, doesn't he?

Because if the church is dead, if it's moribund, if nobody is praying, if nobody is spreading the word, then the devil can safely leave the church to its slumbers.

But once there begins to be signs of life, signs of gospel stirring, then the devil stirs as well. So we need to pray, we need to be alert.

[12 : 20] But notice verse 3, All have not faith, but the Lord is faithful. In spite of the lack of faith, and indeed in spite of the lack of faith often in our own hearts, when we go weak, when we get flabby, and we all do at times, we all feel it's just too much.

God, the Lord, is faithful. He will establish you and guard you against the evil one. And notice once again the reference to the devil. And again, in verse 4, we have confidence that you are doing and will do the things that we command.

And the things that we command is the gospel word brought to us through the scriptures of Old and New Testament and particularly through the work of Paul here.

So the gospel will be guarded. Someone wrote a commentary on Acts, can't remember who it was, an old commentary now, many years ago, called, The gospel cannot be stopped.

And that's what Paul is saying here as well. So, the word of God will make its way against all obstacles. The word of God will break open the grave itself.

[13 : 30] The word of God will melt the hardest hearts and go against the most fierce opposition. We need to pray. And we need to recognize very clearly opposition will come and it will come from within as well as from outside.

So, spreading the word Secondly, verses 6 to 15, obeying the word. Now we command you, brothers and sisters, obey the word.

This is apostolic authority. The word believed must always be the word lived. Remember, it's not enough to have an intellectual agreement. The letter of James says, the demons believe and tremble.

The theology of hell is totally orthodox. I'm more orthodox than the theology preached in universities and colleges often. And yet, of course, it makes no difference because it is simply a recognition of facts the way they are.

They're not a life-changing thing. Now this message has its difficulties, but I think the overall message is clear enough and it focuses on two particular matters.

[14 : 37] Paul, first of all, talks about an idleness which discredits the gospel. An idleness which discredits the gospel. Verse 6, keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition.

You may remember those of you here last week as I said, the tradition here is not traditionalism, but the kerugma, the message of the gospel, the facts of the gospel, the body of teaching that was

passed down from the apostles.

Now, this is not a general statement about work and unemployment. That's important to notice that. We are living in an age when unemployment is beginning to loom large again and when people are worried about their jobs.

This has nothing to do with that. This is about people who can work, who ought to work, who have worked and won't do it. Who sit around gossiping and being busybodies instead of being busy. And once again, when Paul says, I worked, remember he was a tent maker, I did a day job, so to speak, which paid me so that you didn't need to pay me.

[15 : 49] Once again, that's not a general statement. Paul is not saying that all servants of Christ, all preachers of the gospel, all evangelists must be like this.

Basically, it's a response to a particular situation. Because remember, elsewhere, for example, in 1 Timothy, Paul, in 1 Timothy 5, Paul talks about the need to support those who work in the gospel. Worthy of double honour, he says, in 1 Timothy 5. And then in Matthew 10, the labourer deserves his wage. It's not a general statement, it's a response to a particular situation.

Nor is it a gospel of work. It's not the Protestant work ethic, in the sense that there is something that's good and valuable, in eternal terms, about work.

Rather, the issue here is being a positive member of a fellowship. Now, Roy talked a lot this morning about getting involved. And getting involved, of course, means all kinds of things.

[16 : 55] Not all of it is up front, not all of it is visible. Paul talks about being a help, a support, to the work of the gospel, in the fellowship and in the world church in general.

And in verse 11, he talks about busy buddies. You hear that some among you walk in idleness. Not busy at work, but busy buddies. Kind of first with too much time on their hands, and no doubt making excuses about interfering and gossiping.

Gossip's very clever at disguising itself. Gossip often disguises itself as taking an interest. You know, Paul says, pray for us.

If the devil can't stop us praying, then another tactic of his is to try to turn our prayer meetings into gossip sessions. We spend far more time talking about people to each other than talking to the Lord about them.

And that's such a dangerous thing. We have a very, very clever enemy. And we've got to be aware of his tactics. And as members of this fellowship or other fellowships, some people come from other fellowships, as members of the various fellowships we belong to, we must not be busy buddies.

[18 : 10] We must be positive, helpful, up-building members of the fellowship. So an idleness which discredits the gospel. And secondly, a lack of discipline which does not obey the gospel.

Verse 13, As for you brothers, do not grow weary in doing good. If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person.

I have nothing to do with him that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. Now, this is not as serious as the situation in 1 Corinthians 5 where Paul says we must withdraw from the evil living brother there.

And that's a far more serious situation, a situation of dreadful sexual irregularity and public disgrace to the gospel. This is really carrying on from the busybody and so on.

And remember, this is a corporate responsibility. It's a corporate responsibility for us in fellowships to make sure that gossiping is not encouraged.

[19 : 18] It's not given house room. It's not welcomed. Because when that happens, then the gossips and the busybodies set the agenda, don't they?

Everything, everything centres around their view. The point, surely, in verse 14, if anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, is that the Word of God must set the agenda.

Now, the Word of God must set the agenda in every aspect of our lives. Not just in public preaching and teaching, not just in prayer meetings, but in business meetings, for example. So often, I've been at meetings where people, godly people, forgot completely the principles of the scriptures and simply looked at the whole situation from a worldly point of view, from a wholly secular point of view. Now, Paul is saying everything has to be done under the authority of the gospel. If we're truly a gospel church, if we're truly a biblical church, that will shape all our lives together, it shapes our individual lives.

But notice, verse 15, do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother. In other words, this is to be done in a spirit of love.

[20 : 34] It's awfully, awfully easy to get a spirit of vindictiveness, isn't it? And a spirit of anger. This must, and of course, if we're going to do this in a spirit of love, it's got to be done prayerfully.

It is very, very difficult. It's not at all easy to go up to someone, someone perhaps whom we know, whom we love dearly, and say, look, you are not helping the fellowship.

You're hindering the work of the gospel. And that's why in Scripture, both Old and New Testaments always said that kind of thing needs to be done with more than one person present.

Two or three witnesses. This was part of the ancient Jewish law. And it's a good principle in the work of the gospel. Now you see, these two matters are fairly humdrum.

They seem to be miles and miles away from the man of lawlessness and the Lord Jesus destroying him with the brightness of his coming. But, what Paul has said throughout this letter is if the devil can't get you on doctrine, if he can't get you to believe the wrong things, then he's going to get you to live in the wrong way.

[21 : 39] So, living faithfully and waiting expectantly will affect everything. Not just doctrine, but the most humdrum affairs of everyday life.

And notice, of course, that both the sin and the remedy are the same thing in many ways. The sin is largely a sin of the tongue, isn't it?

Gossiping, being a busybody, that's largely a sin of the tongue. The remedy also comes from the tongue. The tongue which becomes a messenger of the word of God.

Words are powerful, both for good and ill. I'm sure there are many times when you're feeling perfectly happy, then you remember some comment, a hurtful, insensitive comment that someone made perhaps many years ago, and you're suddenly churned up.

You're upset. It spoils the whole day. Clouds cover the sun. Let's be careful with our words. We sang this morning, didn't we? I can't remember the exact quotation.

[22 : 44] Take my lips and let them be filled with messages from thee. That's our lips. And remember the letter of James, the danger of the tongue and yet the wonder of the tongue which God has given us.

So, spreading the word, obeying the word, and finally, verses 16 to 18, trusting the word. Let's look first of all at verse 17.

It seems a rather curious little phrase. I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. This is a sign of genuineness in every letter of mine. It is the way I write.

Now, it's very common in the ancient world for the writer to dictate the text of a letter and then write the last sentence and append his signature to show it was genuine.

Now, remember this second letter and indeed glance back at the chapter 2, just over the page, chapter 2, verse 2, where Paul says not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed either by a spirit or a spoken word or a letter seeming to come from us.

[23 : 57] This letter which contained information and teaching which had set them off on the wrong lines. Paul says this is a genuine letter. And it's interesting as well, at the end of 1 Thessalonians back in, I don't need to look this up, but back in 1 Thessalonians 5, 20, 20, 27, he says, I put you under oath before the Lord to have this letter read to all the brothers.

In other words, both these letters come with the authority of the apostle. Slightly earlier in that chapter he said, verse 20, do not despise prophecies but test everything and hold fast to what is good.

Notice he doesn't say test this letter. He doesn't say read this letter and then have a discussion to see if you agree with it. He says, read this letter and here he says, obey it. The words of the apostles and the words of the prophets are there to be obeyed.

They are there to be followed. And similarly, in his last letter in 2 Timothy he can say, guard the gospel, pass it on, the trustworthy, life-changing gospel.

And that's why I call this little section trusting the word. In particular he makes two great affirmations. First of all, verse 16, may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way.

[25 : 25] Now, like all the great gospel blessings that are anticipations in this world. But the full blessing comes in the world to come.

C.S. Lewis says that our Father gives us many pleasant resting places on the journey but he never allows us to mistake them for the homeland. So, peace, fully, will only be true in the new creation.

And that peace is never independent of the Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who, as Paul is later to say in Romans, made peace by the blood of his cross.

The Lord is the one whom we know through the word and whom we find peace at the cross. This is, this is a gift of God. My peace I give with you, to you, as Jesus says to the disciples in John, not as the world gives.

This is the peace that passes all understanding that Paul is to talk about in Philippians. And the second great affirmation is verse 18, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

[26 : 36] And grace is the word which sums up the whole gospel, isn't it? We are all debtors. There's grace that brought me safe thus far and grace will bring me home.

Grace is the great leveler, isn't it? What are we before the cross? Totally equal in our sin. What will we be before the throne?

Totally equal in Christ. And it's no accident that the New Testament itself is to fall silent with this, grace be with you.

A word that Paul loves, a word that Paul delights to use, and a word that is so offensive to the natural person, because basically if we are saved by grace, that means we contribute nothing except our sin.

That's when you discover some people don't want to go to heaven. When they discover they have to sing worthy is the lamb. When what they actually want to sing is worthy am I and show to the Lord the reasons why they're there.

[27 : 43] Grace is the gospel itself. So whether Thessalonica in the first century or Glasgow or Vietnam, Cambodia, America, Germany, wherever we are in the 21st century, this is the message of 2nd Thessalonians, the God of peace and the God of all grace.

And the message of this letter is live faithfully as we wait expectantly for his Son from heaven. Amen. Let's pray.

God our Father, we praise you for your grace. The grace that taught my heart to pray and grace those fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.

And for the intimations and foreshadowings of peace that shine even into this dark world. And so, Father, take us from this place to live faithfully and to wait expectantly and to proclaim the praises of him who called us out of darkness into his marvelous light.

Amen.