

6. A Powerful Word

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Date: 27 November 2011

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[0 : 00] Well, we're going to turn to our Bibles now and to our reading this evening. In fact, two readings. We're going to read in two places in the New Testament. First of all, a few verses from 1 Peter, chapter 2.

In fact, actually, chapter 1 and 2. You'll find that on page 1014, I think, if you have one of our church Bibles. And then, if you can also get your finger into Ephesians, chapter 4, and we'll read some verses there.

I think that's page 977, if you have one of the church visitors' Bibles. First Peter, chapter 1, and then Ephesians 4.

I'm going to read from 1 Peter 1 at verse 13, but it's the last few verses of this chapter, in the beginning of chapter 2, that we're really focusing on.

Therefore, says Peter, prepare your minds for action, and being sober-minded, set your hope fully on the grace that will be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

[1 : 04] This letter of Peter, as all the letters of the New Testament, is always forward-looking to the glory that is to come in the midst of the suffering of the present day. So look forward to the revelation of Jesus Christ, he says.

And as obedient children, do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance. But as he who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct.

Since it is written, you shall be holy, for I am holy. And if you call on him as father who judges impartially according to each one's deeds, conduct yourself with fear, with reverence throughout the time of your exile, knowing that you were ransomed from the futile ways inherited from your forefathers, not with perishable things such as silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot.

He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but was made manifest in these last times for your sake, who through him are believers in God, who raised him from the dead and gave him glory, so that your faith and your hope are in God.

Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth, for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart. Since you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.

[2 : 39] For all flesh is like grass, and all its glory like the flower of grass. The grass withers and the flower falls, but the word of the Lord remains forever. And this word is the good news that was preached to you.

So put away all malice and all deceit and hypocrisy and envy and all slander, like newborn infants long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up to salvation, if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

Turn over then, if you would, back a little bit to Ephesians, Paul's letter to the Ephesians in chapter 4, and another passage about how we grow up spiritually through the word of God.

Beginning of chapter 4, Paul says, He goes on to explain how it is that that is going to happen.

If you look at verse 11, it's through the gifts that God gives to his church to enable his church to grow up. Verse 11, He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may be no longer children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness and deceitful schemes.

[4 : 34] No, rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow, so that it builds itself up in love.

Amen. May God bless to us this his word. Well, it's a few weeks since we were in our last study in this little series called What is the Bible?

Bible. And last time we were thinking that the Bible is a trustworthy word. That is, we can trust the Bible because it is divinely authored.

It is written by God himself. It is the words of men. Of course it is. But it's more than that. Men wrote not by their own volition, as Peter says in his second letter, but they wrote and spoke as they were carried along, driven along by God's own spirit.

So God both fully inspired the writers, he drove them along, but also we saw that God himself expired, that is, he breathed out the very words themselves.

[6 : 01] And that's, if you remember what Paul is speaking about, in 1 Corinthians chapter 2, where the apostles say that they impart to us things that they were given by God, says Paul, in words spoken by the Spirit.

Words taught by the Spirit himself. So these are God's own words, written by God's own chosen vessels. That's why we can trust them.

It's a trustworthy word. But of course, because these are God's own divinely uttered words, then they are also powerful words.

They must be, mustn't they? They are words that are a living and active revelation that will affect great change in the world, that will achieve powerful consequences in every arena that God desires them to have an effect.

They're powerful words because they are God's words. Now, a person's words get power from their position, then their status, don't they?

[7 : 13] So a world leader, his words are powerful. His words can start and end wars. They can create peace. They can confer honours on people. Words of powerful people are constantly having huge effect in our world today.

Everybody, every day, is wanting to know what the words of Angela Merkel, the Chancellor of Germany, are going to be. Will the European Central Bank underwrite the problems in the Eurozone?

If she says something that sounds positive, the markets go up. If she says something that says nine, the markets go down. And this last week, it's been down, down, down, down, hasn't it? Powerful words.

Or Warren Buffett, the famous investor that everybody listens to. I saw the paper last week. He was telling people we should be buying shares in Tesco. Don't believe me. I'm not saying whether you should or you shouldn't. But Tesco shares went shooting up because Warren Buffett's words are very powerful.

So the words of the powerful are powerful. They're powerful because of the person who utters them, the influence they have, the power that they have. Well, how much more for the words of the one who is the creator and the Lord of heaven and earth, God himself.

[8 : 27] God's words have almighty power. God's words have eternal power. God's words are living and active and powerful words.

The writer to the Hebrews in chapter 4, verse 12 says this, God's word is sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, discerning the thoughts and the intentions of the heart.

And no creature is hidden from his sight. All are naked, he says, exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

What is the Bible? What is this book of the very words of God? It is a powerful word. It is a living and active revelation.

And that's what we want to think about tonight. Now, Thomas Cranmer, the great English reformer and martyr, put it this way, God's word, the Bible, he said, is powerful to tell the world, to turn the sinner, and to tether the saint.

[9 : 36] And I think that's as good a summary as any. And it will guide our thinking tonight about how God's word in scripture is powerful. And I want to think about each of these three things in turn.

So first of all, God's word is powerful to tell the world. That is, I think, that the Bible's message carries God's power to convict the world.

If you turn to John chapter 16, and verse 8, we read this. Jesus is speaking about his going to the Father and of his sending of the Holy Spirit upon his church.

And he says in John 16, verse 8, when he comes, the Spirit comes, he will convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.

In these chapters, in John 14 to 16, Jesus is in the upper room, as you know, with his closest disciples, those who would become the apostles of the New Testament church.

[10:36] And he teaches them about the coming of the Holy Spirit after Jesus' death and resurrection and ascension. The coming of the Spirit to empower them for their ongoing witness in the world.

And Jesus says to his disciples, he, the Holy Spirit, will bear witness about me. And he said, you also will bear witness about me because you've been with me from the beginning.

That's John 15, verse 27. And that's why the Holy Spirit comes, Jesus says, to lead the apostles into what he calls all truth.

To bring to their remembrance everything that Jesus had taught them. That is how they will then be led into all truth. so that the church, the New Testament church, might be in possession of the full truth of God, everything they need for life and God needs.

That's his promise to these, his apostles. By the way, that text is grossly abused today more often than not. You'll hear many people invoking it as they speak about the Spirit leading the church today into all truth.

[11:47] And they'll say, well, Jesus promised to lead us into all truth, and he is leading us into new truth. New truth beyond the scriptures, new truth about this, that, and the next thing. Of course, that is absolute and total nonsense because Jesus didn't speak these words to us today and to the contemporary church.

Jesus spoke these words to, very specifically, his 12 disciples in the upper room. And he said he would lead them into all truth as he reminded them of everything that Jesus had already spoken to them.

Jesus cannot, the Holy Spirit of Jesus cannot remind you and I of things that Jesus spoke to us in the flesh, can he? Because we were not there in the flesh. He cannot lead the church today into all truth like that.

He was talking about the apostles and he would lead them into all truth so that through their words and their writings, we might indeed, as the church today and the church throughout all the ages, have all the truth of God.

So the Spirit comes, Jesus says, so that in proclaiming this authentic apostolic gospel to the world through their apostolic words, the work of the Spirit would be accomplished in this world until the Lord Jesus comes again.

[13:02] And that ministry of the Spirit in the world is, as Jesus said here in John 16, verse 8, to convict the world concerning sin and righteousness and judgment.

Telling the world and convicting the world's people, convincing them of the great eternal realities of their sin before a holy God and of the reality of the coming judgment before the risen Lord Jesus Christ and pressing home upon their hearts their lack of righteousness with which to face such a judgment.

That is the work of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament church. And of course, that is exactly what the apostolic preaching did. It convicted the world of these great momentous eternal realities.

It told the world, it announced the news, the gospel of the coming of the Lord and judge. That is the very heart of the apostolic preaching. In fact, that is what defined apostolic preaching.

Convicting the world about the coming judgment at the hand of Jesus, the risen Lord. So in Acts, you see it all over the place. But just take one example. Acts chapter 17 when Paul is preaching in the Areopagus to the wise men of Athens and he says to them, these wise professorial types who thought they knew everything.

[14:27] The times of ignorance, the times of ignorance, Paul says, God in the past overlooked. What a thing to proclaim to the Athenians with all their intellectual pride.

the times of ignorance God overlooked in the past. He said, but now he commands all men everywhere to repent because he has fixed the day on which he will judge the world in

righteousness by the man he has appointed, the risen Lord Jesus Christ.

And God's word powerfully tells the world the truth to convict people's hearts, to convict their consciences about, the weighty matters of sin and righteousness and judgment.

And God's word therefore has a powerful and personal convicting power. If you read Acts chapter 24, you read of how Paul spoke to Felix, the Roman governor, about these things.

We're told, Paul reasoned with Felix about righteousness and self-control and the coming judgment. And Felix was terrified. Terrified.

[15 : 34] Well, no wonder he was terrified if you know anything about Felix. He was a ruthless man. He was a savage ruler. He was a corrupt man.

He was an immoral man. And God's word was powerful to convict his human heart of these things. No creature is hidden from his sight. That word is like a powerful two-edged sword piercing,

piercing, the very thoughts and intentions of our deepest hearts, yours and mine.

And it exposes those hearts. It exposes our sin. It exposes to us the terrible consequences of our sin.

Now friends, if you're a Christian believer, you know that, don't you? And I know that. We know the power of God's word to pierce our hearts, to convict us of wrong, to bring us to our knees, to show us our lack before a holy God.

[16 : 41] We know that power. That's why we hide from God's word so much, isn't it? That's why so often, instinctively, we want to silence it. We do not want to hear those piercing, convicting words.

That's why the world will do everything it can to silence the convicting power of God's words. We're constantly hearing about it, aren't we? People being arrested for preaching the truth about God in a politically correct age.

You will have read about the cafe in Blackpool which some weeks ago was raided by the police and the owner was arrested. What was his crime? Well, his crime was that in this Christian cafe where he looked after all kinds of young people and got them off the streets, his crime was that on the wall of the cafe there was a television screen just silently, continuously playing through the words of scripture.

And he was raided and told, you can't do that because the convicting power of God's word is so alarming to people. Well, we cannot, we cannot silence and stop that because the Bible fearlessly tells the world about sin and about righteousness.

And about judgment. And no one can escape. James in his letter tells us that God's word is like a mirror, doesn't he? It's like a mirror that shows up the spots and the blemishes on our face and on our bodies that we never really want to accept about ourselves.

[18 : 11] But the mirror does not lie. See, we simply don't believe the truth about ourselves, do we? We don't believe the real truth about our lack, about our deficit, about our guilt before a holy God until we are confronted with the convicting word of God in Scripture.

Remember how we found it when we read together in Romans chapter 3. All alike are under the power of sin. No human being will be justified in God's sight.

There is no distinction. All lack the glory of God. Now that is what the Bible tells the world. That's what the Bible tells you and me personally and goes on telling you and me.

It's a word that convicts us about sin and righteousness and judgment, holds before us the great eternal truths, the weighty matters of heaven and hell, of life and death, the things that we constantly try to blank out of our lives and our consciousness.

But the Bible tells the world. It powerfully convicts us to see the truth just like looking in a mirror.

[19 : 34] But that's not the only power in God's word. God's word also is powerful to turn the sinner. The scriptures are not just like a mirror to reveal the truth about ourselves.

They're more than that. They're a window through which we can see the truth about God and his great salvation that's made known in Jesus Christ, his son. God's word is not only a convicting power but praise be, God's word is a converting power.

It points us and it leads us to the Savior. And it calls us into that life that only God through his word can give us into eternal life.

The gospel is a double-edged sword. Listen to Peter in Acts chapter 10 when he's preaching to Cornelius and his household and telling him what the gospel message is.

Jesus says, says Peter, Jesus commanded us to preach to the people and testify that he is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead.

[20 : 42] You see, the convicting power about sin and righteousness and judgment. But that's not all. He goes right on to summarize the message of all the scriptures.

He says, to him, to Jesus, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. You see, the word, the word of God has power also to convert from guilt to forgiveness, from justice to mercy.

It has power to call people out of death and into life. And that's what the ministry of the Lord Jesus himself demonstrated so powerfully, wasn't it, in word and in deed.

Remember in John chapter 5 when Jesus confronts a cripple at the pool of Bethesda and Jesus spoke to him and commanded him and said, rise, take up your bed and walk.

And immediately he went on to speak using that miracle as a sign, as a visual aid if you like. He went on to say this, a time is coming when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God and those who hear shall live.

[21 : 57] The words of Jesus have life-giving, converting power. They impart eternal life to the dead. So in John chapter 6 Jesus says that absolutely explicitly, doesn't he?

John 6, 63, the words I have spoken are spirit and life. If you abide in my word, he says to his disciples in John chapter 8, you are true disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will set you free.

You see, the word of life itself turns the sinner. It raises the dead to eternal life. but not only Jesus' words, so also Jesus promised for the words of his apostles who would go on speaking Jesus' words after his ascension through the Holy Spirit's work.

In John chapter 17, you remember Jesus prays to his Father and he says, this is eternal life that they know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ you have sent.

John chapter 17 and verse 8. And he goes on and says, I have given them, I have given the apostles the words that you gave me and they have received them and come to know in truth.

[23 : 18] But Jesus goes on to pray for the future. He says, I don't ask for them only but also for those who will believe in me through their words, the words of the apostolic gospel.

So their words as well as my words, Jesus is saying, will have converting power. Power to bring life to the dead. That's why in John chapter 14 where Jesus speaks of the greater works that the Father will do through the Son in giving life to multitudes of the dead through his word after his triumph on the cross.

He's talking about the proclamation of the gospel. Through the powerful word of the apostolic gospel being proclaimed in Jesus' name and that word having the power to turn sinners and to bring life from the dead.

And that is exactly how the church was born. That's how the church of Jesus Christ began. You read through the book of Acts and you see the beginning of that great work, the greater works that Jesus is speaking about.

As through the gospel, the apostles tell the world and turn sinners to find salvation in Jesus Christ. Men and women who are convicted of their sin through the gospel of Christ and who are converted to life through that same gospel.

[24 : 43] The same word of God that slays is the word that lifts up and gives life. And you see, if you're a Christian believer today, then it is thanks only to the convicting and the converting power of the word of God.

That's how you came to faith. You were convicted. You were laid hold of by the spirit of God through the words of scripture, touching your life, piercing to your heart, showing you the truth about time and eternity.

But not leaving you in the despair of the realization of your situation before God, drawing you into the life that that same word promises.

And that's what Peter is speaking about in the passage that we read there in 1 Peter. Do turn with me back to 1 Peter, 1 Peter chapter 1, page 1014.

Look at how Peter describes what has happened to those who have become Christian disciples.

Verse 23 of 1 Peter 1. You've been born again, he says, not by perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God.

[26 : 01] In verse 25, this word is the good news that was preached to you. You've been born again through the living and abiding word of God. James in chapter 1, verse 18, puts it very similarly in his letter.

He says, of his own will, of God's own will, he brought us forth, brought us to birth by the word of truth. So it's God's word.

It's the biblical gospel of good news in all the scriptures, the Old Testament and the New Testament, that turns the sinner, that imparts life to the dead.

The word of God is the instrument, it's the weapon, it's the double-edged sword by which the spirit of God imparts eternal life to the people that God is calling. God's word has converting power. And that's why all through the New Testament there are so many allusions to that. When Paul writes to the Thessalonians in 1 Thessalonians 1, he gives thanks that the Thessalonians receive the word, not, he says, as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God at work in you who are believing.

[27 : 18] At work to convict and to convert and to impart life. In Philippians 2, verse 16, he calls it the word of life. The word of life.

John uses that terminology also in his first letter. The word of life, he says, was made manifest to us. Made manifest in the flesh, in Jesus Christ.

But then he says, that which we have seen and heard, we proclaim also to you that you might have fellowship with us and through us with the Father and the Son, which is eternal life.

You see, he keeps saying again and again and again that this word is powerful. It's powerful and living and active to create eternal life, to impart eternal life, to change the future of human life, to change the future of the whole of eternity, we would have to say.

Words are powerful to impart life. Just like the words that are spoken in a marriage service, in a marriage vow.

[28 : 29] They are powerful, aren't they? They're not inconsequential words. We'll see that next Saturday in Terry and Charlene's wedding. They create a new union when those words are spoken, a whole new life.

Or when a judge announces words, they are powerful words. Words to acquit or words to imprison. Words that will confer freedom or liberty or words that will bring captivity.

Powerful words. And Peter says this is the good news, this word that was preached to you. But notice down to chapter two in verse nine.

Notice what he says about this word. This word also is a word that is going to be proclaimed by you to unleash its converting and convicting power. You, he says, are a chosen people.

You are a royal priesthood that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. You see that wonderful privilege that is given not only to the apostles but to all the people of God, all who have been called themselves out of darkness into light.

[29 : 40] all of us are given this privilege to proclaim this same life imparting word. The word that tells the world and turns the sinners.

It's our privilege as the church today to join in the greater works that Jesus promised would be done as he ascended to the Father and the Spirit came. That we should also be a part of this giving life to the dead all over the world through the living and abiding word of God.

What an extraordinary privilege that is, isn't it? And that is the mission of the church. That is the great commission that we should go into all the world and proclaim this word, teaching them to obey all that I have commanded you, said Jesus.

And that and that alone is what will tell the world and which will turn the sinners and bring life to them. Nothing else will do that but the power of this word that was proclaimed to you, the word of the apostolic gospel of truth.

Because God's word is powerful. That's why in Acts chapter 4 the church's prayer was always this, grant to your servants to go on speaking your word.

[31 : 04] that's the task of the church. That's how the world will be reached. And we must never ever be sidetracked as the church today from that primary task.

Not by anything, however worthy it might seem, however much it might seem to bring quicker results or more impressive things. No. God's word and God's word alone has power to tell the world.

And God's word and God's word alone has power to turn the sinner, to bring life to the dead. So God's word tells the world, it turns the sinner, but God's word thirdly is also powerful, as Thomas Cranmer said, to tether the saint.

Not only does God's word convict and convert, but God's word also controls, it controls the whole of the new life that it has itself brought into existence.

persons, so that that new life will grow and develop and become mature in the Lord Jesus Christ. And that's what Peter goes on to speak about in 1 Peter 2, verse 2, when he tells his readers to long for the pure spiritual milk, that by it you may grow up, he says, into salvation.

[32 : 23] Peter is speaking about us being built into a spiritual house. we're being built as living stones, says Peter. And God doesn't want his people to remain as spiritual infants.

God wants eternity to be populated with mature and Christ-like images of his son. That is our calling. Not to remain infants in Christ, but to grow up in Christ, become fully mature, grow up in the salvation that we've been born into through the word, but to try going on feeding on that same powerful word of God.

Powerful to feed us, that we should be nourished and grow and develop and become strong. Now that's also what we read about in Ephesians chapter 4.

Turn back to that passage with me if you would, because as we close it's quite instructive I think.

Page 977. Paul in Ephesians 4 is starting to apply the gospel that he's been expounding in the first three chapters, as his fashion is in his letters.

And he's speaking about what it means to live the Christian life, what it means to be saints in Christ Jesus. Look at what he says in verse 1 there. What it means to be a saint in Christ in Ephesus is that it means that we are to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which we've been called.

[33 : 53] Look down to verse 13. What does that mean? Means, he says in verse 13, he wants us to attain maturity. Mature manhood he calls it.

The measure of the stature of Christ. Verse 14, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro and so on, but instead, verse 15, rather speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ.

Walk in a manner worthy of the calling that you've received. Grow up in maturity in every way, not remaining as infants, but growing into the mature manhood that we are called to in Christ.

How, though, is that going to happen? Well, the answer is right there, isn't it, in verse 11 of Ephesians chapter 4. Do you see? It's through the ongoing ministry of the word of God in the church.

That's what all the gifts of the Spirit that he mentions here are about. That's the ministries that the Spirit exercises through them. He gives the apostles and prophets first.

[35 : 06] They spoke the word of God. They wrote down the words of scripture. They're the foundation of the whole New Testament church, as Ephesians 2 verse 20 tells us. But also, do you see, he doesn't stop there, does he?

He gives evangelists, pastors and teachers to do what? To go on teaching and applying that all-powerful word to equip the saints, says Paul.

To equip them for their works of ministry so that the whole body, the whole church is built up in the unity and in the knowledge of Christ the Son.

See what he's saying? He's saying it's the same word of God, the ongoing ministry of the word of God in the church that tethers the saints, that guards the saints, that keeps them, that keeps warning us against our sin and our natural tendency to falsehood and to falling away, that constantly leads us instead in paths of righteousness and peace, that keeps us in fellowship with the Lord instead of drifting away from him, that strengthens and encourages us in the many ongoing battles that there are in the Christian life.

So that all the way along and all through our Christian life from the beginning until the very end we are kept safe by the power of God through the power of his tethering word to control us, to lead us, to lord it over us, but in the most gracious and wonderful and blessed way possible.

[36 : 42] It's the word of God that controls our Christian walk, Paul's saying in Ephesians chapter 4. If we had time we could go on to Ephesians chapter 6 because it's very familiar, isn't it, but it reminds us that the word of God, the sword of the Spirit, comforts and strengthens us also in our Christian warfare.

The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God, remember. It controls our Christian walk and it controls our Christian warfare right to the end.

And friends, that is why the church needs and every single Christian needs to long for the pure spiritual milk of God's word.

Because by it, by feeding upon God's word and by that alone, we will grow up into salvation. Our salvation is not a static thing.

Absolutely never the case in Scripture that we're led to believe that once you become a Christian, that's it, nothing else really matters. No, no, no, no.

[37 : 52] What matters is the question, are you growing today? Are you going on with the Lord Jesus Christ today? And that will only happen if there is a ministry of the powerful word of God in your life and in the church.

That's why it's only where the word of God is cherished and trusted and put at the very heart of the ministry can any church flourish. Only if that's the case.

With Christians growing under the controlling power of God's word and people becoming Christians through the convicting and the converting power of God's word. If God's word is rejected or if it's sidelined or if it's ignored, no church, no church can possibly flourish.

All that's left in that case is that it would demise and eventually die. Because the Bible is absolutely clear.

People are born again. People are brought to birth and they grow up. They are brought to maturity through the living and abiding word of God.

[39 : 10] A powerful word that tells the world and that turns the sinner and that tethers the saint. So friends, let's give thanks for the powerful word of God that we have in our scriptures.

And let's encourage one another to constantly long for the pure spiritual milk of that word together. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

We know our need of it. And we pray that when in the paths of sin we move and so the living God forsake our conscience by your word you will reprove.

You will convince and bring the wanderers back deep wounded by your spirit's sword and then by pardoning grace restored. The sacred lessons of your grace transmitted through your word repeat and train us up in all your ways to make us for your work complete.

Your love's redeeming plan fulfill. perfect us in your holy will. For the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ. [40 : 33] Amen.