

1 Thessalonians 1:5-6

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back then to that passage that we read from Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. And our text is in chapter 1 and the verses this morning are 5 to 6. 1 Thessalonians 1 verses 5 to 6.

And really we'll read from verse 4. For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you. Because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction.

You know how he lived among you for your sake. You became imitators of us and of the Lord. In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with joy given by the Holy Spirit.

And then in the evening, we'll be thinking about verses 6 to 7. There'll be a slight overlap. And this morning, our main aim is to think about how the gospel came to Thessalonica.

And the three ways that we're going to think about it this morning are that the Spirit gives the word. So the Spirit gives the word of the gospel.

[1 : 18] The Spirit empowers the witness to the gospel. And the Spirit awakens the hearer of the gospel. The Spirit gives the word. The Spirit empowers the witness.

And the Spirit awakens the hearer. But first, a wee bit of background about the church in Thessalonica. It's not a church, maybe, that we're particularly familiar with.

But it's a church that has a huge amount to teach us about our walk with God. First of all, whereabouts was Thessalonica? Well, Thessalonica is actually in modern Greece.

And it's right up in the northeast. And it's one of the places that Paul came to on his second missionary journey. So he'd already been out on a tour that essentially landed him up in Antioch.

So a lot of his work was still in Palestine and in that kind of region. But his second missionary journey took him all the way to Corinth. So he went all the way through what's now Turkey.

[2 : 26] And continued through into what's now Macedonia and that kind of area. And on into Greece. And ended up right in the south of Greece in Corinth. And the way that he got there was certainly not a particularly easy journey.

For example, you'll remember about the church in Philippi. And the two very famous converts in the church in Philippi were Lydia, whose heart the Lord opened.

And the Philippian jailer, who was so amazed at the fact that Paul stayed in the cell even after the doors were opened. That he actually asked what he should do to be saved.

And he believed and he was baptized with his household. And so we know quite a bit about them. But what happened afterwards was that Paul, Silas and Timothy, the three missionaries that were on their journey together, continued on until they got to Thessalonica.

And when they arrived in Thessalonica, they found that it was quite a big city. There would have been about 100,000 people there. And it was also the capital of Macedonia. Which was this area, as I mentioned, to the northeast of Greece.

[3 : 39] And they found quite a number of Jews there. In fact, they had a synagogue. And for about three weeks, for on three Saturdays, they were sharing the gospel with these Jews.

And it looks like during the week, they were actually sharing the gospel with non-Jews, with the Gentiles, with the pagan worshippers that were living in the city at the time.

And what eventually happened after these three weeks was that quite a number of Jews and Gentiles as well, people who had no real Jewish background, a lot of these people started to believe the message that Paul was bringing them.

And the Jews were extremely jealous of this, the Jews who hadn't believed Paul's message. And effectively what they did was they started a riot. And they charged Paul and Silas and Timothy with basically rebelling against Caesar, turning the whole world upside down and telling the people and telling the people that were in charge of the city in Thessalonica, that they were proclaiming another earthly king that was opposing Caesar and telling them that they should follow him instead of Caesar.

So they were eventually driven out of Thessalonica. They had to leave before the situation got worse. They ended up in a place called Berea. And Berea isn't too far from Thessalonica.

[5 : 01] And they found that the Jews that lived in Thessalonica were, in Berea, excuse me, were actually quite a bit more receptive to the gospel than the Thessalonian Jews had been.

But that didn't last very long. There were a lot of believers in Berea, but the Jews who had opposed them in Thessalonica followed them all the way along the road to Berea and drove them out of Berea as well, so that Paul had to really escape with his life and go down to Athens and then down to Corinth.

But it's a sign of just how much Paul loved the churches in that area, in Thessalonica, in Thessalonica and in Philippi as well, that he sent some of his missionaries back to check up on how they were doing.

And he writes this letter to the Thessalonians from Corinth. He'd arrived in Corinth and he was there for about a year and a half, but his mind was always on this church in Thessalonica, and he really cared about their spiritual welfare, especially because he had left them in a real state.

There'd been a riot. He had had to leave in the midst of all this turmoil in the city, and he really didn't know how these Thessalonian Christians were coping. Well, Timothy comes to him and he says, they're really coping well.

[6 : 17] They're coping spiritually. They really have a love for God and for his word, and they have a love for his people as well. But they're concerned about a few things, and these are the things really that we'll be considering later today.

But this morning, he wants to remind them how the gospel came to them in the first place. He wants to encourage them, in spite of all your suffering, remember how you first believed in the Lord Jesus Christ and in his gospel.

And that brings us to our first point, which is the Spirit gives the word. Now, when Paul says, our gospel came to you, he said it didn't just come with words.

We didn't just come and stand in the marketplace and give you an eloquent speech that just persuaded you by how intellectual it sounded. He says it didn't come to you with the words of men.

He says it came to you with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction. In other words, this was a word that they were sharing and which God himself blessed.

[7 : 25] Now, we know that God won't bless and won't honor something that's not from him, something that's contrary to him. And you can think back, for example, to the false prophets that were in the Old Testament.

They would stand up and they would say to the people who were rebelling against God, don't worry, you can carry on as you are because you still have the temple and you still have your Jewish way of life and God will protect you.

And you don't need to worry about the Assyrians. You don't need to worry about the Babylonians because they're not going to come and harm you because you're still of the Jewish people and really regardless of what you do, you're going to be okay.

And true prophets, prophets like Jeremiah and others, were really concerned about these false prophets. But what God says to them is, what God says to Jeremiah and others is, I have not sent those false prophets and their word will not come true, but they will die along with everybody else who rebels against God.

So God, of course, was never going to bless these false prophets and the lies that they were telling the Jewish people. But he does bless the word that comes from himself.

[8 : 37] And he blesses it with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction. And that deep conviction didn't really come to the people who were hearing the gospel.

It was the actual people that were sharing the gospel that had this deep conviction. They knew that what they were telling these people in Thessalonica was words, words of life.

And that if they believed those words, they would have life now and eternal life as well. And they were absolutely sure, they had conviction, they had assurance that what they were telling these people was absolutely true.

But more than that, the Spirit gives the word of the Old Testament. I want you to put yourself really in the position of these Jews and these non-Jews that are in Thessalonica.

Because they're not hearing the words of the New Testament. We're reading from the New Testament just now. We're familiar with the gospels and with Paul's letters and with others as well.

[9 : 40] And when we think about the gospel, we think, well, you know, of course we know the gospel. It's here in the whole of the New Testament and it's explained by Matthew and by Luke and by John and all these others.

But what Paul actually had to share was just the Old Testament. He didn't have any written words about the Lord Jesus Christ. But he knew, and the Jews that believed the message, knew that the Old Testament really was speaking about Jesus.

And Jesus was the fulfillment of the Old Testament. And more than that, it was the Holy Spirit that actually gave the Old Testament as coming from God.

The message that Paul had to proclaim was from God. But the Old Testament that was actually being shared had come out of God's mouth. Remember, for example, in 2 Timothy, Paul is writing to Timothy and he tells Timothy, all scripture is breathed out by God.

He's not saying all scripture is written by man and God rubber stamps it, so to speak. He says that God actually spoke the word of God.

[10 : 56] God opened his mouth and out came what we have as the Old and New Testament. And we might think, well, that's a fairly obvious point and we know that. We know that the Bible really is the word of God.

But I was hearing a story about one of my friends in Edinburgh a while ago. And he was speaking to one of his friends that had been in church for quite a long time. And he imagined that he knew his stuff and he knew his theology.

And they were talking about what might happen if one day someone came along and just added a new chapter to the end of Revelation or to some other book in the Old or New Testament.

And the reply to this friend was, well, at the end of the day, it wouldn't really matter because it was the church that decided what was going to be in the Bible anyway. You know, it was the church that put the Bible together and sanctioned it.

And that's why we have it the way that we do today. And to put it mildly, my friend exploded at this statement and asked him just, how can you believe that this word that we have in front of us claims to be the word of God, actually spoken out by God himself?

[12 : 16] And yet at the same time, you can just say, well, it's not really from God. It's actually just from the church. It's amazing how easily that can creep in if we don't watch ourselves. We have to remind ourselves every morning, every evening when we're reading the Bible, this is genuinely and reverently speaking extraterrestrial.

It is not from this world. It has come from outside. It's really the one thing that we have every day in our hands that did not come from this world.

It was written by man, fair enough, but it was spoken out by God. And more than that, he says it came with the Holy Spirit. And you may know that the word in the Old Testament used all the time for spirit is the same word that's used for breath.

So when Paul is saying to Timothy, it was breathed out. The Old Testament was breathed out by God. It was actually the Holy Spirit that was in action at the time.

So I want you to think about Paul sharing this message with this church in Thessalonica. He's telling them words of truth, but he's telling them words that actually came out of God's mouth.

[13 : 28] And it's no surprise that it had such an impact because God himself was at work. But more than that, the Spirit empowers the witness.

Our second point is that the Spirit empowers the witness. It's all very well if this word has come from God. But if there's nobody to bring this word all the way from Judea, where it originally was, and to bring it round to Philippi and to Thessalonica and right into Greece to share it with people, nobody would understand what it was really talking about.

Paul, Silas and Timothy went on this huge journey over into Greece, but they needed the Holy Spirit to enable them to speak. So of course they were speaking the actual words of the Old Testament, but you can imagine that in the synagogues and outside the synagogues speaking with other people, they would have been using their own words.

They would have been using their own reason and they would have been sharing the gospel in their own way with the folks in this city. But even those words that they were sharing were inspired by God.

That's not to say that they were absolutely perfect. The word of God that we have here is perfect, but the words that they were sharing had still come from the Holy Spirit himself.

[14 : 54] Remember in Luke 12, Jesus is assuring his disciples that he's sending out, don't worry about what you'll say when, and he specifically says, when you are taken before synagogues.

Luke 12, 11, he says, when you are taken before the synagogues and before the rulers of the people and you're asked about this faith that you're propagating all over the world, don't worry about what you're going to say because at that very point when you're asked to give a defense, the Holy Spirit will give you the words to speak.

Paul, Silas and Timothy turned up in this city who had never heard the gospel and had never understood that the Old Testament was talking about the Lord Jesus Christ. And in explaining that to the people that were around them in the city, the Holy Spirit himself was giving him the words.

And again, it is no surprise the impact that it had in this city, that so many of the Jews suddenly had their eyes opened and realized what they were talking about.

Now that's fair enough. We can say, well, that's wonderful for the church in Thessalonica. That's wonderful for these places that Paul went to. But that was Paul and we know that he was the greatest missionary that ever lived.

[16:13] And of course, the words that he shared were going to have an impact. But if it was the Spirit working through Paul, then at the end of the day, it wasn't really Paul's own power that was convicting anybody.

It was the Holy Spirit himself that was working. And we have absolutely no reason to doubt that the Holy Spirit can't work in the same way today. And we need each and every one of us to pray for this congregation that we have here and for every congregation in Aberdeen, that every time the gospel is shared, the Holy Spirit himself would be giving all the preachers his own words and would be convicting and converting the people that are sitting in the chairs or the pews.

And there's an interesting story about this kind of faith that we should have in prayer, about the Spirit working that Spurgeon once told. He said that he'd asked one of the preachers that he'd been training whether he was seeing many conversions in the congregation that he was working in.

And he says, well, you know, I've been working there for an entire year now and I'm just not seeing any interest. Nobody's really picking up on what I'm saying.

Nobody's suddenly having the light switched on and they're realizing who Jesus is and they're putting their trust in him. And Spurgeon said to him, well, when you preach, what's your attitude?

[17:39] Do you stand up in the pulpit and expect that as you're preaching, people are going to be converted? And he says, well, no, really, I don't. I just stand up and I preach and I hope that something will happen.

And Spurgeon said, is there any wonder that people aren't being converted in your church? Because you have no belief in the power of God to work through what you're saying. You and I have to have total confidence that as this word is being faithfully preached every single Sunday, people will be converted because it's not man who is at work, it's the Holy Spirit who's at work.

But that then brings us on to our third point. The Spirit gives the word, the Spirit empowers the witness, but the Spirit awakens the hearer as well.

Paul had brought his Spirit-inspired understanding of the Spirit-inspired Old Testament all the way around to this place, this city of Thessalonica.

But he had to share it with people who would then believe in the gospel. And they would never accept the gospel unless the Spirit was at work in their lives.

[18:52] Remember that anybody who hears the gospel and is not a Christian is spiritually dead. They're unable to hear anything you say unless the Spirit makes them alive and able to have faith.

And remember just exactly the story about Jesus and Nicodemus. Remember right way back in John chapter 3, this is at least 20 years before Paul was in Thessalonica.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus at night and he says, we know that you're a teacher and that you've come from God. We know that the words that you say are actually from God. And Jesus rather than picking up that conversation says, unless you're born again you cannot see the kingdom of heaven.

And of course Nicodemus would have been taken aback at that. And we should all be taken aback at that. Jesus tells us you must be born again. Well our response would be we can't be born again of ourselves.

We didn't give birth to ourselves in the first place. It was our mothers that did that. So how can we give birth to ourselves by ourselves? But Jesus tells them at the same time and this is later on in the same chapter whoever does not believe is already condemned.

[20 : 12] So he says you must be born again and that's something that you can't do. But he says you must have faith and that is your responsibility. But it's important to remember too that being born again while it's not something we are able to do by ourselves.

It is the most important part of the Christian message. And I want us particularly to remember this morning that when the Holy Spirit changes a person's life it's not just changing a person's mind.

It's not someone saying well that's an interesting new idea that Jesus is the Son of God and only by believing in Him can I have eternal life. You're not accepting a new idea.

You're having and accepting a new life. And this reminds us that we should never add Jesus on. He should actually be the one that we submit to and the one that we trust in.

Think about it like this. You've been to the doctor because you're feeling quite faint and you're getting chest pains and you think I really think I should sort this out.

[21 : 19] So you go along to the doctor and you explain the symptoms that you've been having and the doctor after a few checkups says I'm really sorry I have terrible news for you.

You have a fatal heart condition and if you don't have a heart transplant right now immediately then you'll lose your life. And so of course you're rushed to hospital and the heart is ready and everything's set up for the heart transplant.

And in just the last minute you give up on the idea and you think actually you know what I think I'll be okay I'll just take the heart home with me. You know put it in a cooler box.

I'll take the heart back with me and you know it'll be okay so long as I'm carrying it around. And so of course you're carrying this heart around in this box not attached to you and is it any wonder that your heart condition becomes so bad that you die?

And why do you die? It's because you just took the heart around with you and you weren't actually given a new heart in you. That's exactly the same for people who just carry their religion around with them carry Christ around with them and say I'll rely on him at times but he needs to stay in his box he needs to stay in this place where he doesn't come into my life and absolutely change who I am.

[22 : 45] I'll keep him in this box and it'll be okay. Well if you keep Christ in a box Christ will do nothing for you because Christ is not going to accept any less than being king over your life.

You can't simply put your heart in a box you need a new heart and you need it put in you so that you are born again and accept the gospel. As I mentioned that's not something we can do in ourselves that's the work of the Holy Spirit but faith is our responsibility.

And so the three points that we've mentioned are the work of the Spirit things that the Spirit himself does. But there's also responsibility for each one of us in these three things.

Think back to when this Bible was first being written the Spirit breathed God breathed out the Word and the Spirit was at work in producing the Word of God so it came from God.

But if someone hadn't written it down we simply wouldn't have the Word of God in written form. So it was the responsibility of God in a sense to give this Word and the responsibility of man to record it as led and instructed by God.

[24 : 01] In the same way Paul had been given words by the Holy Spirit but they weren't going to benefit the church in Thessalonica if he was still sitting in Jerusalem expecting somehow that they would hear it without him.

It was his responsibility to travel those hundreds and thousands of miles round this coast into Greece to share the gospel with them. And the third point of course we've already mentioned John 3 Jesus says you must be born again but also in John 3 whoever does not believe is condemned already.

So then we see that God is at work in all these three points. God is sovereignly at work doing exactly as he pleases but he also has people doing their own part of the work and accepting their own responsibility and burden.

So remember this morning that God works and man works in each of these three things that we've talked about. If for example we are Christians then we only have God to thank because he has regenerated us and we're born again by his power and the fact that we've accepted him is exactly because of that.

But by the same token if any of us do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ yet we've only ourselves to blame because we haven't trusted in him. Either you have God to thank or as John himself says you are already condemned for not believing.

[25 : 31] So that is the choice that we have and the responsibility that we have to believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and by believing have life in his name. Amen.

Let's pray.