

**First Christian Church (Lawrence, KS)**  
**Dr. Barry M. Foster**  
**October 13, 2019**

## **The Power of the Word of God**

1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; 2:13

Hebrews 4:12

Acts 20:17-35

1 Peter 1:22-25 (NIV)

[Slide 1]

*Opening*

Good morning church! That song has been in my mind and heart for a full week, and it is my earnest prayer that it will be in your mind and heart for much longer, that it will become your frequent prayer, so that every time we come to worship, or you have your devotions, or are in a D-group, even when you're at work or any time of the day, your attitude is that you are waiting for God to speak to you, and expecting that he will do so. So let's listen to the Spirit together.

*Review*

Today we're finishing this second part of the series "Rebuilding Community": "Renewing the Priority of the Word of God." We've seen how Ezra led the community of Israelites living in Jerusalem and Judea after the return from exile in a renewal of their commitment to the Mosaic covenant; how he rebuilt that community's foundation on the word of God—studying it, living it out, and teaching it to others. We've seen how Jesus insisted that he was the one to whom the OT Scriptures all pointed, that he was the only person who rightly understood how to interpret the Scriptures, and that he had an authority that superseded that of the Scriptures, for he was the Son of God. We've seen that Jesus claimed that he was the embodiment of God's truth, the living word of God, whose teaching was the standard by which to measure the truthfulness of every idea, opinion, and claim. He said that the only way to know the truth was to become his disciple and learn from him, to continue to follow his teaching. In doing so, we would find

spiritual freedom that only he could give. And we saw that the earliest church understood that their community was founded on the truth, because it was founded on the apostolic teaching that passed on the truth about Jesus along with his own teachings. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostles and other NT writers wrote with the conviction that God was speaking through them, just as he had done with the OT prophets. His word through Jesus and the apostles and other NT writers constituted an authoritative word from God that surpassed even the OT Scriptures, for it came from the Son of God himself. And like the OT Scriptures, this authoritative word was absolutely truthful in all that it taught.

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Today I want to close this series with a message that answers the “so what?” question. I hope that all of you have grasped a lot of the implications of recognizing the word of God as the standard for measuring truth, as the only way to know true freedom. But it would be easy to let those sermons roll around in your mind as examples of doctrinal teaching—things that were important to believe and understand, but which were mostly ideas, concepts, things to ponder, not actually important for my everyday life. That isn’t the case, of course—for almost everything we do is founded in an idea. Even some of our impulsive actions or reactions have at their source a basic idea that grounds our actions. What you actually believe always affects what you do.

But today I want to show you one reason why this all matters, why our community, this church, as followers of Jesus Christ must be built upon the foundation of the word of God. It all has to do with power.

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### *Introduction*

The NT consists of twenty-seven books from nine different authors. The passages we read this morning come from four of those nine authors: Paul, the unknown author of the letter to the Hebrews, Luke (who is recounting Paul’s exhortation to the Ephesian elders), and the apostle Peter. Each of them are writing to instruct a group of Christians, and each of them wants those Christians—and by extension, us—to understand a crucial principle: the importance and power of the word of God.

We could have included passages from four other authors of the New Testament as well. Matthew, Mark, John, and James each includes significant passages that highlight this same emphasis on the importance and power of the word of God. That’s eight out of nine authors. And even the ninth author, Jude, includes a reference to God’s word, and implies that it is crucial, though he

doesn't explicitly say so. From the lips of Jesus and from each of the authors of the NT, we hear the consistent witness insisting that the word of God is essential for Christian life and spiritual growth.

Let's look at each of these four passages in turn.

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*Hebrews 4:12*

When the author of Hebrews says that "the word of God is living," he doesn't mean that the Bible is a sentient being, or a fourth member of the Trinity. The Bible isn't alive in that sense of the word. He means that God's word is a vehicle for the living God to communicate with us. It expresses the very life of God—God is the source of all life, so his word is life-giving, creating and sustaining spiritual life in his people. It's like a seed.

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Jesus often compared the word to a seed. Think about seeds for a moment. (I'm thinking of plant seeds, but the same principle is true for animals.) In a sense, seeds are the basic vehicles for life, for they carry within themselves the necessary ingredients to grow into a fully mature plant, which will contain more seeds that have that same capacity for life, to produce additional plants with additional seeds. It is one of the key differences between living things and non-living things—the capacity to grow and reproduce. That's how it is with the word of God. God's word carries within itself the power to give you life, to change your life, to empower you to live according to God's ways. It is the primary vehicle for communicating God's life to us.

You see, when God communicates, when he sends out his word, he isn't simply passing on information. He is passing on transformative power. His word carries spiritual DNA, if you will, that is able to generate spiritual life and health in you once it takes root in your heart.

How does it work? Let me start by telling you how it *doesn't* work.

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Some people think of the Scripture as a sort of magic incantation. Say these words and God will perform a miracle for you, or make you rich, or bring you a handsome husband. But the word of God is not an incantation. It is quite possible to quote the Bible (or call on God's name) with no effect whatsoever. Acts 19 tells us about seven Jewish exorcists who attempted to use the name of Jesus as a magical incantation to drive out demons. It ended very badly for them. There were prophets in Jerusalem during the time of Jeremiah who cited previous words from God claiming that he would protect his city from the Babylonians. But they were

wrong. Many of the Pharisees could quote the Scriptures, but were completely bereft of its power. Even Satan quoted Scripture—but it didn't help him at all.

You see, the Bible isn't a book of magic; its words aren't designed to serve us as incantations to get what we want or what we think we should have. God doesn't do magic. And he never intended for us to think that his word worked like a mechanical or mathematical formula:  $2x + 3y = z$ .

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*1 Thessalonians 1:1-10; 2:13*

So how is it supposed to work? How does God's word have an effect on us? How does that seed grow up and produce something of spiritual value? Paul tells us how in his letter to the Thessalonians.

Paul is really proud of these new believers. They had come from a world that was centered on pagan religions and idolatry, and abandoned all that they knew and believed in order to follow Jesus Christ. What sounds to us like a simple change of religions was, in fact, a dramatic, life-wrenching decision that brought them into severe conflict with virtually everyone they knew, everyone in their city, everyone everywhere around them. Abandoning the practice of worshiping idols brought persecution from the other Gentiles, and declaring Jesus as the Messiah brought them persecution from the Jews.

Yet this small group of converts in Thessalonica had made a profound impact on their world, and not just their immediate world. The churches throughout Greece and Macedonia had learned of their persistence in faith and were emboldened through their example of boldly sharing the gospel with others and holding to their faith in Jesus despite the severity of their persecution. Their faith had provoked the enemies of the gospel to attack them, but it had provoked the Christian churches to a greater depth of faith in their own circumstances. (It sounds a lot like what we hear about the persecuted church around the globe today! Which gives me a great excuse to mention them, remind you to pray for them, and show you this woman who so treasured the Bible she had received when she found Christ, that she kept the pages when her husband tore it up.)

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The key is found in verse 13 of chapter 2: The Thessalonians had received Paul's preaching, his gospel, as the word of God. They had listened to what he had said, and to the Spirit who was whispering to them, "*This is true. This is God speaking to you. Listen. Believe it. Stand on it. This will change you.*"

The Thessalonians accepted Paul's preaching as God's speaking directly to them. They understood that if this was God's messenger bringing God's message

to them, then God was talking to them and that required a response. If there was only one true God, who demonstrated that fact by sending his Son to die on a cross and then raised him from the dead to show his power over death and sin, then that message was more than interesting opinions about philosophy or ethics. That was a call from heaven, and the only possible proper response was repentance and faith—surrender to this God who demanded everything in my life be given to him, but who also offered everything in his life to me.

They received his word—they acknowledged it as God’s message for them—not for their neighbors or those bad people down the street, for them. They grasped its importance and its meaning—not all at once, of course. Paul has to explain things to them several times for them to get it straight. That’s why he had to write the two letters, and to send Silas and Timothy to them several times to follow up on what he had taught them. But even if they only understood things partially (like all the rest of us)—they had positioned themselves in a way so that they could understand. They had taken the stance of being learners, disciples. They realized, *“God has spoken to us. He must want us to understand this. So we’re going to keep listening to him, to his word. We’re going to listen to his messengers, to the teachers he sends who are faithful to the apostolic teaching. We’re going to keep learning.”*

And more than just listening. If they were truly going to keep learning as disciples of Christ, then they would have to put what they heard into practice. They had to adjust their own lives to conform to what Paul said they needed to do, to change their ways of thinking, their attitudes, their habits, their customs. And listen—they had to make some drastic changes, as you can tell from reading the two letters Paul wrote them. But because they began to practice the word of God, to apply it to themselves in their real-world situation, even when it meant hardship and persecution (!), the word began to sprout and to grow, and changed them and then changed those around them. The power of the word of God to transform people and families and communities and the world started to have its effect in the church in Thessalonica.

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That’s how the word of God works. It’s a seed that has to take root in hearts. God is a planter, a sower, a farmer. When he wants a harvest, he doesn’t supernaturally manufacture a bunch of artificial plants and drop them off at the front door. He plants a seed. And another seed. And another seed. He plants things that grow over time, which then produce seeds to start other plants.

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First, he plants his word in a person, in you. He brings a verse, or a passage, or a chapter of the Bible to you. He sends someone with a prophetic word that lines up with the Scripture, or a teacher with instruction about how to understand and apply a portion of Scripture, or a biblical principle. Then the Spirit of God begins working in you as you adjust your life to conform to that truth, to repent of what you had formerly believed and lived out, and to empower you to begin living according to an entirely new and different kingdom, the kingdom of God. Then he begins knitting you into his people, building new relationships that reinforce and strengthen your personal decision to adjust to this new way of living and thinking.

Sometimes the transformation is dramatic and swift, and other times, it is gradual and slow—just as it is with plants and animals and humans in the natural realm. But the power of the word of God to change us is always available, if we'll just receive it and allow his Spirit to use it to shape us into the image of Christ.

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*Acts 20:17-35*

Luke's account of Paul's exhortation to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 offers us some more important insights into how God's word empowers us.

First, let's note that in this passage, Paul tells the Ephesians that he will not see them personally again. He is expecting to die before getting a chance to return to them. But in his absence, he entrusts them to "*the word of his grace,*" by which Paul is referring to everything that he has taught them over the three years he was with them, including what he taught them about how to understand the Scripture, how to rightly interpret the Law and Prophets and Writings of the Old Testament in accordance with what Jesus had taught his disciples and had revealed personally to him. (See verses 20-21, 25, 27, and 31 where Paul describes how he had taught the church daily for three years, and had thoroughly presented the truth, the entire counsel of God, to them, without leaving anything out.)

Paul tells them, "*Even though I won't be here to instruct you, you still have what I've taught you already, and what you've learned from me about the Scripture. God's word will still come to you if you hold on to those two things.*"

What is crucial to recognize here, is that Paul is equating his teaching and explanation of the Scripture and preaching of the gospel with the "word of God." He understands that what he had shared with the church in Ephesus carried divine authority. He wasn't just another guy with an opinion about spiritual ideas; he was a commissioned apostle of Jesus Christ with the life-giving word from God for this world.

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Paul was an instrument that God used to bring his word to people. God continues to use people as instruments to bring his word to people. We don't have anyone he's using to write new Scripture, but we do have chosen instruments God is using to communicate his truth to the church and to the world today. Some of them are people like Ed and Melissa Swanson and John and Melanie Kersteters, missionaries we support who serve with Wycliffe Bible Translators, bringing the word of God to people in their own native language.

Some of God's instruments are pastors and teachers and evangelists who bring the word of God to us in their preaching. I would never class myself alongside the apostle Paul, nor would I want anyone else to say that of me. But I do recognize that God has called me to present his word to his people. That doesn't make me better than anyone else, and it doesn't mean that I get everything right all the time. I'm certainly not infallible. But at the risk of being completely misunderstood or sounding ridiculously arrogant, I think it's vital for the spiritual health and life of this church to assume that if God has brought me to First Christian Church, then God wants to speak to this church through me. There may be times when I will say things in my sermons or my teaching with which you disagree, perhaps strongly. That's perfectly understandable. I don't even agree with myself all the time. But even if we disagree on points, we ought to be able to agree on this—God is still trying to speak to this church through this fallible and flawed vessel. If I need to be corrected, you might be the instrument God uses to help me see that. And if this church needs to be corrected, we all need to hear from God, to listen to what he is saying to us through one another, through the various instruments he uses to bring us his word.

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Second, notice what Paul says about God's word. He says it is able to build you up. It can strengthen you, equip you, enable you, empower you. It can build something in you that wasn't there before, and it can strengthen things in you that will make you more able to cope with the challenges that you are going to face in life, so that you are more equipped to live a life of godliness, to have a life that has meaning and purpose, to have an impact on this world and on eternity.

God's word can strengthen you against temptations that are constantly surrounding you. God's word can break the power of sinful patterns you've developed or learned from your family or assumed were normal because of the surrounding culture. God's word can empower you to walk in righteousness, to develop lasting spiritual abilities and fruit, to become wise and able to discern what is really valuable.

I remember a time early in our marriage when my wife, who is remarkably kind and gentle, was struggling with losing her temper. We had two small kids at the time, and they were just being normal kids. But when you're stuck in a small house with two preschoolers, it can get pretty crazy. And my kind and gentle wife was getting angry at our kids. So she looked up a bunch of Scripture verses about anger, and she wrote those verses out on some cards and taped them on the refrigerator and cupboards where she could see them when she was working in the kitchen (which was part of the racetrack in our house that the kids would run through). Whenever she started to get angry, she would read those verses out loud. She reminded herself of the truth and set her heart to obey those Scriptures. As she did so, two things happened: she started memorizing Scriptures and those verses got rooted in her heart, which started changing her. Mary found herself getting angry less often, and when she did, she was able to quickly change to a different response. God's word got planted in her heart and grew into a spiritual ability because she didn't just hear the word, she received it and put it in practice.

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God's word can strengthen you in areas where you are naturally or normally weak. God's word can produce in you abilities that you lack. I think of a man I know named Jim Arzola. Jim was a Mexican-American who grew up in the *barrio* in Kansas City and worked as a welder for the railroad. Jim never learned how to read. But after two failed marriages, he came to a church in his forties, received Christ, and started hearing the word of God. The pastor announced a plan for reading through the Bible in a year, and Jim decided he wanted to do that. So with the help of his wife, he began, syllable by syllable, reading through the Bible. He literally learned to read by starting to read through the Bible. Jim went on to take classes at the Bible college where I was teaching, including a very demanding class in church history that I taught. He graduated with a Pastoral Certificate, and he and his wife went on to serve as missionaries for a time with Youth With A Mission. God developed an ability in Jim, a natural ability, that Jim lacked, because Jim gave his heart to Christ, and began receiving the word of God.

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God's word will strengthen you against your fears and insecurities. Listen, we all have fears, and we all have insecurities. We all face anxieties of various kinds. For some of us, those fears and anxieties are great, and can be almost debilitating. But if you start listening to the word of God, start believing it instead of your fears, you'll start developing something inside of you—you'll start developing courage and confidence and faith. Spiritual strength will grow up in



you in place of those fears. Trust will become easier when you start rehearsing what the Bible says about God's love for you and his power over your fears.

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The other thing that Paul says to the Ephesians is that the word of God's grace will give them "the inheritance." The word will bring you into what God has for you in his kingdom. God has gifts for you and he has rewards for you. But they have to be received by you. Those gifts and rewards aren't bonuses or special extras for being good. They are simply the results of being a follower of Jesus Christ. Every gift of God and every reward for our faith is bound up in Christ, and is only found in him. All the good things that God has for us aren't things that you can get on your own or have independently without a relationship with Jesus. They aren't separate gifts you can get and keep as an independent thing. They come from being united by faith with him; you have to grow into them (like hand-me-downs).

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*1 Peter 1:22-25*

Let's look at one more point, this one from Peter's letter. Peter says that the word of God is a seed with a particularly important quality—it is imperishable. That means that it is always available, and always full of potency. No matter how old it is, or how long since you planted it, that seed can still sprout, grow up to full maturity, and produce fruit in you. Imperishable means that the seed is enduring. It is always connected to the source; it is always able to bring to you the life that is inherently within it. The word of God is enduring; it won't become outdated or worn out. It isn't dependent for its power on fitting into the current philosophies or educational fads or whatever recycled ideas are being bandied about in the marketplace. It doesn't need updating or upgrading or re-imagining.

What it does need is a home. The word needs a place to be planted, a heart in which it can find good soil. The word needs faith to become operative. The writer to the Hebrews warns his readers not to fall into the same trap that captured the Israelites in the wilderness. They heard the word, but didn't believe it. So, unlike the Thessalonian Christians, they didn't receive all that God had planned for them and provided for them and promised them. All that God had made available to them was there, in the seed, in the promise that he communicated to them. It just needed faith to be activated.

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This imperishable seed, says Peter, is the source by which we are born again. God's word, his promise to us in the gospel, will take root in us and grow

up to salvation—if we believe it. Not just acknowledge it, but actually believe it. Put the weight of our lives on it. Trust it to be true. Turn away from everything else to depend upon it. Believe it so completely that we turn from running our own lives and quit trying to prove that we are good enough for God to love (or at least, not as bad as those other people!). Believe it so that we surrender to him and let him rule over us instead of us ruling over us.

When we do, the Bible says, we are born again. The Spirit of God comes to dwell within us; God actually takes up his residence inside of us. He joins himself to us and says, “*Now let me have the reins. Let me lead you and teach you what it means to really live the way you were created to live.*” The seed begins to grow within our heart, and we are changed. Instantly changed from being lost to being found, and gradually changed from being self-centered and rebellious pursuers of our own way to being God-centered and pursuing the kingdom of God and his righteousness.

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*transition to communion*

What has God been speaking to you today? . . . Have you been born again, or do you just come to church? Do you really believe God’s word? Or do you just consider it a source for some nice inspirational thoughts? Are you ready to surrender your life to him? Again? Daily? Are you standing firmly on the gospel and not just hoping that God thinks you’re ok? Decide today to trust his word and let that seed take root in your heart.

[END]