

INTRODUCTION

I'm teaching verse by verse through 1 Thessalonians. The name of the series is "Finding HOPE in a Hopeless world." Today the message is entitled, "The Gospel According to You."

We use the word "gospel" a lot. We talk about gospel music, but there are different kinds. There's black gospel music, southern gospel music, bluegrass gospel music, and even country gospel music. We pass out gospel tracts. And when we want to convince someone we aren't lying we say, "It's the gospel truth!" And in Tyler, our ministry in the public schools is called Gospel Village. Our English word "gospel" comes from the Anglo Saxon phrase, "God spell" which means "the word of God."

The word in the New Testament is *euaggelizo*, which gives us our English word "evangelism." It means "to proclaim good news." Although we mostly use the word gospel as a noun, over half the time it appears in the New Testament, is as a verb. So with God's help, I'm going to gospel you today. I was gospeled when I was nine years old; and I've been gospeled folks for over forty years. At the end of this message I hope you'll feel good and gospeled!

Our church is in the midst of a gospel transformation. A few weeks ago, our adults started a great Bible study entitled, "The Gospel Project." We generally refer to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the four gospels. But the gospel is found on every page of the Bible. The gospel is the story of God's redemptive plan. God is in the process of redeeming sinful humanity to Himself. You and I are part of God's gospel project.

1 Thessalonians 1:2-6. "We always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers. We continually remember before our God and Father your work produced by faith, your labor prompted by love, and your endurance inspired by hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. 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 we 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 the joy given by the Holy Spirit."

I first heard a little poem about the gospel when I was a teenager. It's been adapted in many forms, but here's the adaptation by Leroy Brownlow:

The Gospel According to You

There's a Gospel according to Matthew;
To Mark, Luke; and John too.
There's another gospel many are reading...
The Gospel according to You.

Many read not the words of the Bible;
I will tell you what some of them do...
They are reading the book you are writing...

The Gospel according to you.

You are writing a gospel, a chapter each day;
By the deeds that you do, by words that you say.
Men read what you write whether faithfulness or true;
Say, what is the gospel according to you?

In this message I want us to examine four aspects of the gospel: The origin of the gospel; the preaching of the gospel; the power of the gospel; and the hope of the gospel.

1. THE ORIGIN OF THE GOSPEL: God chose us because He loves us

Paul wrote these words, "We know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you." Notice two important words in that verse: loved and chosen. Where did the gospel originate? The gospel wasn't some plan dreamed up by one of the Old Testament prophets or by one of the New Testament Apostles. The gospel was born in the heart of God. It's HIS plan.

When we visit Israel, one of my favorite spots is Caesarea Philippi. There is water gushing out of the side of a mountain, and this is the source of the Jordan River. If you could travel back and discover the source of the gospel, it would take you right into heaven and to God's heart.

Paul echoed this sentiment in his letter to the believers in Ephesus. "For he chose us in him before the creation of the world to be holy and blameless in his sight. In love he predestined us to be adopted as his sons through Jesus Christ, in accordance with his pleasure and will."
(Ephesians 1:4-5)

If you asked me when I was saved, one answer would be that I was saved as a nine-year-old boy. But a better answer would be that I was saved before the creation of the world. God chose me to be His son before He created the heavens and the earth.

There's a friendly debate occurring among Baptist Churches today. It is over what is called Reformed Theology, or Calvinism. John Calvin, the father of the Presbyterian Church, wrote a thick volume entitled, *The Institutes of the Christian Religion*.

Remember, the Protestant Reformation was a violent reaction to the Catholic idea that there are good works that can be performed to earn salvation. Calvin and Luther stressed the absolute opposite of this: That there is NOTHING, we can do to be saved. It is all God and none of us.

Hyper-Calvinism, which I've heard referred to as double-barreled Calvinism, is the belief that God has already chosen some people to go to heaven, and He has chosen some to go to hell. It's like you're #6, you're in a fix; you're #7, you're going to heaven; you're #8, it's too late; you're #9, you'll be fine.

This idea was later taken to the extreme position that if this is true, then what's the use of doing missions? William Carey is considered the father of the modern missions movement. In the 19th Century he stood up in a meeting in London and implored the churches to send missionaries to

India. An old Calvinistic Baptist pastor stood up and said, "Sit down young man; When God decides to save the heathen, He'll do it without your help or mine."

So there are some Baptist Churches who don't practice missions. That's why our branch of Baptists became known as missionary Baptists. We believe God wants everyone to be saved, so we take the gospel around the world.

But before a person chooses Christ, God has already chosen him or her before the foundation of the world. God's foreknowledge doesn't affect our freedom. Let me illustrate this. Most weeks, the Holmans and their three kids have Sunday lunch with us. Imagine that I placed an ice cream sandwich and some Brussels sprouts in front of my grandkids. Then I said, "Choose which one you want to eat." I don't have perfect foreknowledge, but I am certain all three of them will choose the ice cream sandwich. But I'm not forcing them to choose the ice cream.

God chose us before we chose Him. Don't you like to be chosen? Remember when you were a kid playing kickball, or softball, or "Red Rover?" There were usually two captains and they would choose sides. They'd say, "I choose you." "I choose you." I can remember being in a group not yet chosen. I'd wave my hand and say, "Choose me! Choose me!"

I have good news for you though: In the most important choice that was ever made for you, God chose you! God chose you and then you chose to accept God's will for your life. That's the origin of the gospel.

2. THE PREACHING OF THE GOSPEL: The Holy Spirit convicts us of sin

Paul wrote, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction." According to Acts 17, Paul preached for four weeks in Thessalonica. Many of the Jews and Gentiles in Thessalonica heard the gospel and turned to Christ. Paul said there were four forces operating when he preached. There were the words of the gospel, the power of the gospel; the moving of the Holy Spirit; and a deep sense of conviction.

Jesus told His disciples that after He ascended back to the heaven, He would send the Holy Spirit to live in them. Jesus called the Holy Spirit the Paraclete, which means "one who is called alongside." The different translations use words for the Paraclete like Comforter, Counselor, Helper. Jesus also said that the Holy Spirit will convict sinners. He said, "When he comes, he will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment." (John 16:8)

We can preach the gospel, but only the Holy Spirit can convict people of their sins. When Jonah preached at Nineveh, he didn't really like the Ninevites. He told them God was going to destroy the city because of their sin. And he would have been glad to have seen the city destroyed. But God sent the Holy Spirit into the heart of the King of Nineveh, and he repented in sackcloth and ashes. All the people of the city followed his example. It wasn't merely Jonah's preaching that saved them; it was the convicting work of the Holy Spirit.

Like many of you, I grew up going to church, so I heard the gospel story many times before I gave my life to Christ. At the age of six or seven I could recount for you that Jesus was born in

Bethlehem, lived in Nazareth, died on a cross, and was raised from the dead. Every time the pastor gave the invitation, I wanted to walk forward to "join the church." I wanted to be baptized because my older sister had been baptized, and I didn't want her to get all the attention. But my mother's intuition told her I wasn't ready yet.

But one Sunday evening, March 11, 1961, the pastor preached on the crucifixion of Jesus. He didn't say anything new or different. But something happened that night. For the first time I realized Jesus died for MY sins. Back then, I didn't know I was being convicted by the Holy Spirit. I just remember I felt so awful about my self-centered life, that I began to weep. Jesus went to the cross to die for my sins. He died because I disobeyed my parents. He died because I would torment my younger brother. He died because I stole that grape from the produce section of the grocery store. I was being convicted by the Holy Spirit.

There are some people who say we don't have to speak the gospel, we just have to live it. We never have to use words to witness about our faith; we just use our lifestyle as a living witness. But there is a subtle danger in that attitude.

Cardinal Bergoglio chose the name Francis when he was elected Pope. He wanted to identify himself with St. Francis of Assisi. There is a statement attributed to St. Francis that says, "Preach the gospel at all times; when necessary, use words."

It's a good quote, but the best sources of his life report that it's bogus. No, that's not in the writings of St. Francis. But, of course, we get the point. It means we should just LIVE out the gospel and when we do, we don't have to preach the gospel with words.

But the truth is we MUST use words to share the gospel. The attitude of that misquote is comparable to saying, "Feed the hungry; if necessary use food."

And we know from St. Francis' journals that he preached the gospel using words. Most days he would preach four times. He would enter a village and stand on a bale of hay, or the back of a wagon and preach. Those who study his life say that his preaching style was like Jonathan Edwards or Billy Graham.

In fact the Bible says the gospel must be preached using words. "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?" (Romans 10:13-15)

I gave my life to Christ in March of 1961, and then a few months later I attended Royal Ambassadors Camp. I was already saved and knew I was going to heaven for the first time. But that week, we had an old hell fire and brimstone preacher. He talked about what happens to a person who doesn't accept Jesus as their Savior. They go to hell, and he described hell in a way that had all of us sitting there with our jaws on the floor. At first I didn't believe it. I'm sure our pastor had spoken on this topic before, but I honestly didn't realize that when I accepted Jesus a few months earlier, that I was escaping hell as well as having the promise of heaven. So, I know for certain I didn't accept Jesus just to miss hell, at the time I didn't know there was a hell!

Have you ever experienced the convicting work of the Holy Spirit? Scary stories may bring fears; sad stories may bring tears, but only the Holy Spirit brings true conviction of sin.

3. THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL: The Holy Spirit gradually changes us to be like Christ

Paul wrote, "You became imitators of us and of the Lord." It's important to remember that when Paul preached to the people in Thessalonica, they didn't have the four gospel accounts of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. These hadn't been written down yet. All they had to go by was the example of Paul, Silas, and Timothy. But these men were imitators of Christ.

There's a lot in the news lately about the threats of North Korea. Kim Jong Un has bragged that they have nuclear missiles targeting New York, Washington D.C., San Francisco, and Austin, Texas. I don't get the Austin part, but someone has said maybe he was riled up by our slogan, "Don't Mess with Texas." Or maybe he wants to corner the market on barbecue brisket. Who knows? A nuclear missile is a powerful force, but the greatest force on planet earth is the power of the gospel. Paul wrote in Romans 1:16, "For I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes."

God has a plan for your life. His plan is to save you, then to change you to be like Jesus. The Bible says, "For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers." (Romans 8:29)

An old West Texas rancher grew up on a ranch and had always lived there. He visited Odessa once years ago after they had built their first three-story building. He had never seen a three-story building or an elevator. He walked into the lobby with his son and was looking around. He saw the elevator doors open and an old lady with a cane walked into it and the doors closed. He saw the lights blink a little bit and in just a few minutes, the doors opened again and a beautiful young girl walked out. His eyes got as big as saucers and he said to his son, "Go get your Ma—we want to run her through that thing a couple of times." That's exactly what God wants to do to you. When his elevator comes down which is his Holy Spirit He wants to take you and change you to make you like Jesus.

What does it mean to be like Jesus? Does that mean I have to have long hair, grow a beard and wear a robe and sandals?" No. We're talking about the inner qualities of Jesus. If you want to know what those are, they're the fruits of the spirit: Love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, goodness, meekness, faith, self-control as you are becoming more like Jesus. That is God's predestination for you. Don't get tripped up on that word. What does the word "destination" mean? If you get on an airplane at Tyler Pounds Field and you are going to end up at DFW, or Houston, your destination has already been predetermined. If you get on the right plane, you'll get to that right destination. Your luggage may not, but you will get to your final destination. "And we know that He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus." (Philippians 1:6)

4. THE HOPE OF THE GOSPEL: God gives us joy in the midst of suffering

Paul wrote, "In spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit." Following Jesus doesn't make us immune to suffering. In fact, it makes us a target for suffering. Paul was run out of town for preaching the gospel. And Jesus said, "Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of me." Then He said, "Rejoice and be glad, because great is your reward in heaven." (Matthew 5:11-12) There's glad, and then there's exceedingly glad. Jesus said we should be exceedingly glad when we suffer for his sake.

That doesn't mean that you slap a fake smile on your face and ignore the pain. No, the pain is real. But in the midst of your pain, you can make the choice to rejoice.

The Psalmist wrote, "Weeping may remain for a night; but rejoicing comes in the morning." (Psalm 30:5) It would be wonderful if life was a bed of roses and we would never suffer. But that's heaven, not earth. Job knew a little about trouble and he wrote, "Man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward." (Job 5:7)

C.S. Lewis wrote, "God whispers to us in our pleasures but He shouts to us in our pain. Suffering is God's megaphone to awake a sleeping world."

One of my favorite poems of all time says, "I walked a mile with laughter; She chatted all the way; but I was none the wiser for all she had to say. Then I walked a mile with sorrow; and not a word said she. But oh, the things I learned. When sorrow walked with me."

CONCLUSION

A number of years ago I was making a mission trip to Malawi, Africa and I visited a memorial to the great missionary physician Dr. David Livingstone. Dr. Livingstone was a successful Scottish physician. He attended a meeting where he heard a missionary from Africa, Robert Moffatt speak. Moffatt said, "On a clear morning, the smoke from a thousand villages could be seen where the name of Jesus Christ has never been heard."

That vision was burned into Livingstone's mind, so he traveled back to Africa with Moffatt. He later married Moffatt's daughter. Livingstone gave his life to the people of Africa. He traveled so far into the depths of Africa that even his guides said they were at the end of the earth. He found a towering waterfall, which he named Victoria Falls in honor of the queen.

All during this time, Livingstone preached Christ, healed the sick, and prepared some of the earliest maps of the interior of Africa. At one point he had been out of touch with civilization for six years. The New York Herald hired a famous British explorer, Henry Stanley, to travel into Africa and search for Dr. Livingstone.

After traveling for many weeks, Stanley came up on a white man—the only white man within thousands of miles. And he uttered his famous line that drips with British understatement. He said, "Dr. Livingstone, I presume."

You've probably heard that part of the story, but now for the rest of the story. Stanley was not a

Christian. He was a rough and coarse man—a wicked man in his own estimation. But meeting David Livingstone changed his life. Livingstone didn't have to preach the Bible to Stanley; he just showed him the love of Christ. Stanley later wrote: "For four months and four days I lived with him in the same hut, or the same boat, or the same tent, and I never found a fault in him. I went to Africa prejudiced against religion as the worst infidel in London. But little by little, seeing his piety, his gentleness, his zeal, his earnestness, and how he went quietly about his business, I was converted by him, although he had not tried to do it."

A few months later, on May 1, 1873, Livingstone was found kneeling by his cot, dead. By his request, his heart was removed and buried in Africa before his body was mummified and returned to England where he received a hero's welcome.

Before his death, Livingstone had begged his supporters in England to send another missionary to replace him when he died. Nobody responded to his appeal. So eventually, there was a preacher who returned and took up his mission work. And that man was Henry Stanley.

If someone followed you around for four months, would the words you speak and the deeds you perform make them want to convert to Christ?

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For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes