

## INTRODUCTION

This is the sixth message in the series from 1 Thessalonians. The series is entitled, "Finding Hope in a Hopeless World." In this message we're going to study "The Life-changing Power of the Word of God."

A lot of people are confused about what the Bible teaches. Here are some humorous answers to a Bible quiz given to middle school students.

1. Noah's wife was Joan of Ark.
2. Moses went to the top of Mt. Cyanide to get the 10 Commandments.
3. The seventh commandment is, "Thou shalt not admit adultery."
4. Joshua fought the battle of Geritol.
5. The followers of Jesus were called the 12 decibels.
6. David killed Galahad, who was one of the Finkelsteins.
7. A Christian should have only one wife. This is called monotony.

The Apostle Paul had preached only three weeks in Thessalonica before he was run out of town by an angry mob. But he left behind a group of believers who formed a church. He wrote them this letter to encourage them in the face of opposition.

1 Thessalonians 2:13-16. "And we also thank God continually because, when you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God, which is at work in you who believe. For you, brothers, became imitators of God's churches in Judea, which are in Christ Jesus: You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews, who killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets and also drove us out. They displease God and are hostile to all men in their effort to keep us from speaking to the Gentiles so that they may be saved. In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last."

A. J. Jacobs is a journalist from New York City who subjects himself to real life experiments and then writes a humorous book about it. For instance he once spent a year reading every volume of the Encyclopedia Britannica.

In 2007 he wrote a book entitled, *The Year of Living Biblically: One Man's Humble Quest to Follow the Bible as Literally as Possible*. There's an obscure rule in Leviticus 19 about Jewish men not cutting the corners of their beards. Jacobs wasn't sure what were the corners of his beard, so he just didn't shave at all.

Jacobs isn't a Christian, his parents are Jewish, but he claims to be an agnostic. For this project he bought a Bible and read it in four weeks and wrote down every rule he could find, and tried to obey it. He had a list of over 700 rules. The vast majority of these rules were the kosher rules found in Leviticus.

He stopped wearing clothes of mixed fabrics. He played a ten-stringed harp and blew a shophar at the first of every month. He refused to shake hands with women, because they might be ceremonially unclean.

A man saw him in Central Park and asked him what he was doing. When he explained, the man asked Jacobs if there was a rule he hadn't obeyed. Jacobs pulled some pebbles out of his pocket and said he hadn't had an opportunity to stone someone who had committed adultery. The man admitted that he had committed that sin, so Jacobs said, "Great!" But before he could throw the pebbles at the man, the man grabbed the pebbles from his hand and threw them at Jacobs. Jacobs said, "An eye for an eye." So he threw the pebbles back at the man.

Of course, Jacobs conducted this experiment to write a funny book, and he accomplished that goal. He said reading the Bible didn't cause him to believe in God, but it did change him from an agnostic to what he called a reverent agnostic. He reported that he found something very powerful in sacred rituals. For instance, he was a workaholic, but for a year he had to refrain from any work on the Sabbath. He reported that it remarkably lowered his stress level.

Of course, his experiment was flawed from the beginning because he didn't understand that the Bible isn't a book of rules. It's a love letter from God. If you only read it looking for rules, then that's what you'll find. But if you read the Bible searching for God, you'll find Him also.

Jacobs missed the point of the Bible because scriptures says, "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him." (1 Corinthians 2:14)

But Jacob's experiment reveals what many modern people think about the Bible. They think of it as an ancient, archaic book of impossible-to-keep rules. But for those of us who know God and love God, we know that this book is more up-to-date than tomorrow's newspaper.

Our nation is losing its moral compass because many of our leaders no longer consider the Bible to be a reliable guide for truth. In 2005, the state supreme court in Colorado overturned a death penalty on a convicted murderer because the jurors consulted a Bible while deliberating over the sentence. The court ruled "the Bible constituted an improper outside influence."

But I agree with American statesman, Daniel Webster, who wrote: "If we abide by the principles taught in the Bible, our country will go on prospering; but if we and our posterity neglect its instructions and authority, no man can tell how sudden a catastrophe may overwhelm us and bury all our glory in profound obscurity."

Let's consider four truths about the Word of God.

## **I. THE WORD OF GOD COMES THROUGH ORDINARY PEOPLE**

Paul referred to his preaching to them when he wrote, "You accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God." (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

Paul had the audacity to say that the gospel of Jesus Christ wasn't just a story from his imagination, but it was the Word of God. And as we're reading his words two thousand years later, we still consider it to be the Word of God.

The thing that makes the Bible totally unique is that it was written over a period of 1,500 years by forty different people, in three different languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek). These were ordinary people who were inspired by the extraordinary Spirit of God. Peter wrote, "For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." (2 Peter 1:21)

Virgil or Homer never prefaced their writings with "hear the word of the gods." Shakespeare or Milton never asserted their writings came straight from God. But in the Bible, you read the phrase "The Lord says," over 2,600 times. When the Bible speaks, God speaks. It isn't merely the word of men; it is the Word of God.

Is the Bible unique? Consider how the Book of Mormon was written. One man, Joseph Smith, claimed an angel named Maroni led him to some golden plates inscribed with Egyptian hieroglyphics. Over the next few months, Joseph Smith dictated the translation of these tablets – which no one else saw, and which he claims he gave back to Maroni. Not many non-Mormons know this, but do you know how Joseph Smith claimed he dictated the Book of Mormon? He didn't look at the tablets. Instead he used something called a "seers stone" which psychics of that day used to find buried treasure. He put the chocolate-colored seer stone in his hat and covered his face with his hat, and the stone showed him what to say. I've read the book of Mormon and apparently that magic rock spoke King James Version English because much of the Book of Mormon is just sections from the King James Bible.

Or how was the Quran written? Beginning in 610 A.D. Mohammed was in a cave when the angel Gabriel appeared to him and dictated what he was to write. That begins a series of revelations that Mohammed wrote down until his death. For instance, God told him to stop facing Jerusalem when he prayed and to face Mecca. Muslims claim the Quran can only be read in Arabic, so if you want to read it, you must learn Arabic.

As Christians, we don't ascribe to any kind of holy dictation theory. God spoke through all different kinds of ordinary people. Moses was a prince of Egypt writing in the wilderness. Daniel was a prime minister writing from a palace in Iraq. Paul was a prisoner writing from behind bars. Amos was a farmer; Peter was a fisherman; Solomon was a king; Luke was a doctor, and Matthew worked for the IRS!

God spoke in different ways to different people. He thundered His message to Moses. To Jeremiah, God's Word was like a fire in his bones. To Elijah, God spoke in a still small voice. God spoke to Daniel through dreams and visions.

The Bible is written for all people. It is the world's best-selling book. The full Bible has been translated into 518 languages. Portions of the New Testament have been translated into 2,798 languages. That number was good last week; it keeps changing, because almost every week, it is translated into a new language.

The fact that the Bible was written down by all these ordinary people convinces me it is truly the Word of God. If I picked forty people in East Texas and separated them and then told them to write about a controversial subject, do you think there would be complete agreement? Would those forty documents have a common theme and subject? I seriously doubt it—and these forty people would be living at the same time, speaking the same language, and living in the same culture.

But these forty men who wrote the Bible lived in different times, different cultures, and wrote in different languages, and yet the Bible has a common theme. The Bible has a literary symmetry that can only be described as miraculous. God's Word is communicated through ordinary people, who were moved by the Holy Spirit.

Some people claim the Bible is just a collection of old myths and fables. Others call it the "good book" but they don't consider it to be "God's Book." But for those of us who have studied it for decades, we believe it is the Word of God.

## II. THE WORD OF GOD IS AT WORK IN US

Paul went on to write, "The word of God, which is at work in you who believe." (1 Thessalonians 2:13)

When you are thirsty, you can drink water, and that water starts to work in you to relieve your thirst. When you are hungry, you can eat food, and that food works in you to give you nourishment and strength. When you breathe in, oxygen goes into your lungs, and it works in you to give you energy. Without water, food, or oxygen, we would soon die.

The Word of God is even more important. Jesus told Satan, "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4 NKJV)

The Bible is like living water that quenches your spiritual thirst. It is like bread that nourishes your soul. It is like life-giving oxygen as God inspires you.

The Bible says, "For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." (Hebrews 4:12-13)

Since this is God's Word, we should be careful not to criticize the author. A self-appointed art critic was visiting an art museum, making snide remarks about most of the paintings. She approached one frame and said to the guide, "I find this image to be shallow, crude, and lacking in beauty. What is it?" The guide said, "Ma'am, that's a mirror." The Bible not only gives us a picture of God, it gives us a picture of ourselves.

Years ago I used to teach a discipleship study called Masterlife, written by Avery Willis. There was a presentation in Masterlife called "God's Word in Heart and Hand." It was a simple memory tool using your hand to understand how to get a firm grasp of God's Word, literally and

spiritually. Jesus said that Satan wants to steal the Word from you heart like birds swooping down to steal seed on a hard pathway.

Here's a simple way to remember how to handle the Word of God. As you hold your left hand palm upward, your thumb can represent HEARING God's Word. If your only interaction is to hear the Word, it will be hard to retain it. It would be like trying to hold a book just using your finger! The forefinger stands for READING Bible for yourself. When you do that, you have a better grasp of the word, but it's still easily removed. The next finger stands for STUDYING the Word of God. When you study the Word, that means you read a passage or a verse over and over and ask yourself what it means. The next finger stands for MEMORIZING God's Word. How much of God's Word have you memorized? David said, "I have hidden your Word in my heart, that I might not sin against you." (Psalm 119:11)

When you hear, read, study, and memorize God's Word, you have a good grasp of it. But the last finger stands for MEDITATING on the Word. That's when you ponder over and over again what God is saying. I can hear, read, study, memorize, and meditate on the Bible, but if I only hold my Bible in my fingertips, it can still be snatched away. It's only when I move it into the palm of my hand that I have a firm grip on it. Your palm represents APPLYING God's Word. That's when you ask yourself, "What is God telling me to DO in response to His Word?"

To what extent is God's Word at work in your life?

### **III. THE WORD OF GOD PRODUCES OPPOSITION**

Paul wrote, "You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews." (1 Thessalonians 2:14) Paul faced hostility and opposition in every city where he preached. Paul referred to the Jewish troublemakers who had driven him out of town and were now opposing the believers in Thessalonica. He writes that the Jewish people killed God's prophets, and even killed the Son of God. He almost sounds anti-Semitic, but remember, Paul was a Jew. And he had been one of those who opposed Christians. Paul approved of the death of Stephen and even cared for the coats of the men who stoned him to death.

When you believe the Word of God, you're going to face opposition. Why? Let me give you three reasons.

#### **A. The Gospel exposes the ugliness of sin**

The Bible teaches that the heart of the human problem is the problem of the human heart. We are all sinners. Jeremiah wrote, "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked." (Jeremiah 17:9 KJV)

Open your newspapers, and what do you read? Violence, wickedness, and cover-ups. The problem in America isn't the lack of gun control; it's the problem of sin.

There are social evolutionists who claim humanity is getting better and better. Education and

technology are going to move us to a place of human utopia and goodness. It's not happening. We're seeing more and more hideous and horrific acts carried out by people.

I've got bad news and I've got good news. The bad news is that "the wages of sin is death." But the good news is "the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 6:23)

## **B. The Gospel forgives undeserving sinners**

The Gospel announces that there is salvation for anyone who comes to Christ, regardless of how bad they've been. A pastor friend of mine was talking to a prison social worker once. The social worker wasn't a believer, and he had a problem with Christian groups coming into the prison and preaching salvation. The social worker said, "Do you mean to tell me that a convicted murderer or rapist here in prison who comes to Christ can be forgiven and be just as accepted by God as someone, like me who has lived a good, honest life?"

The pastor said, "Yes." The prison worker said, "Well, then I don't want anything to do with the Bible." That's the scandal of grace. I'm happy to report that the social worker later became a believer and a leader in his church.

## **C. The Gospel predicts punishment for sin**

Another reason people don't like the Bible is that it is clear in its message that God will one day punish sin. That's unpopular. Paul wrote this about the Jews who were opposing the gospel: "In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last." (1 Thessalonians 2:16) A few days before He was crucified, Jesus wept over Jerusalem and predicted its destruction because they had not recognized Him as God in the flesh.

In 70 A.D. the Romans attacked Jerusalem and destroyed the city. Paul wrote this letter a few years before it happened, but even when he wrote this letter, the Jews were already in war against the Romans. Paul saw this as God's punishment on the city for rejecting Jesus and opposing the gospel.

Most people don't like to hear about hell, which is God's ultimate punishment for sin. I've been praying for God to send us a Spiritual Awakening in America. I've studied the previous spiritual awakenings in our nation and I want to talk about the First Great Spiritual Awakening. It happened in 1730, when there were just thirteen British Colonies. One of the pastors God has used to spiritually revive the people in New England was Jonathan Edwards. He preached a famous sermon called, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." Jonathan Edwards wasn't some backwoods bumpkin. He was a highly educated theologian. He had graduated from Yale, and married the daughter of the first President of Yale. Yale, Harvard, and Princeton were all founded to train preachers. Jonathan Edwards was the President of Princeton when he died at age 55.

Maybe we need to hear sermons like his if we're going to see a spiritual awakening. Here's an excerpt from his message: "The bow of God's wrath is bent, and the arrow made ready on the string, and justice bends the arrow at your heart, and strains the bow, and it is nothing but the

mere pleasure of God, without any promise or obligation at all, that keeps the arrow one moment from being made drunk with your blood. Thus all you that never passed under a great change of heart, by the mighty power of the Spirit of God upon your souls; all you that were never born again are in the hands of an angry God."

It is nothing but God's hand of mercy that holds you from falling into the fire every moment. It is to be ascribed to nothing else, that you did not go to hell last night. And there is no other reason to be given, why you have not dropped into hell since you arose in the morning, but that God's hand has held you up. There is no other reason to be given why you have not gone to hell, since you have sat here in the house of God. Yea, there is nothing else that is to be given as a reason why you do not this very moment drop down into hell."

Jonathan Edwards wasn't a hell-fire and brimstone preacher yelling and pounding the pulpit. He read his messages in a high-pitched voice with no emotion. And yet there are reports of people in the congregation weeping and holding onto the pews and posts of the church building to keep from falling into hell. He proclaimed God's punishment for sin, but he also offered God's invitation for salvation.

He concluded his message with these words: "And now you have an extraordinary opportunity, a day wherein Christ has thrown the door of mercy wide open, and stands in calling and crying with a loud voice to poor sinners; a day wherein many are flocking to him, and pressing into the kingdom of God. Many are daily coming that were very lately in the same miserable condition that you are in, are now in a happy state, with their hearts filled with love to him who has loved them, and washed them from their sins in his own blood."

## CONCLUSION

The Word of God has supernatural power to change lives. In 1949 the Foreign Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, appointed a Texas pastor by the name of Dr. Julius Hickerson to serve as a missionary in Colombia. His specific task was to build a seminary in Cali to train Columbian pastors to share the gospel and start churches.

However, before he could ever build the seminary, Dr. Hickerson died in a small plane crash over the remote jungles of the mountains between Colombia and Venezuela. Two years later, a delegation of natives from the interior came to the Baptist Mission station in Barranquilla. These natives announced to the missionaries that they were followers of Jesus. The missionaries were surprised because they hadn't sent missionaries into those remote areas.

They asked how the natives heard the gospel. The new believers explained that they had found a "book that came from heaven." It was a leather-bound New Testament written in Spanish with the name "Julius Hickerson" engraved on the cover. Only one member of the tribe could read Spanish, so he read it in several villages. Everyone in these villages became Christians and several churches had been started using nothing more than the model in this book from heaven.

Julius Hickerson died in a plane crash before he could build the seminary, but his Bible survived. These Columbian natives read it and gave their lives to Christ. That's the life-changing power of the Word of God!

## OUTLINE

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"You accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God." *1 Thessalonians 2:13*

"For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit." *2 Peter 1:21*

### II. THE WORD OF GOD IS AT WORK IN US

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"For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of Him to whom we must give account." *Hebrews 4:12-13*

### III. THE WORD OF GOD PRODUCES OPPOSITION

"You suffered from your own countrymen the same things those churches suffered from the Jews." *1 Thessalonians 2:14*

#### The Gospel

- A. Exposes the ugliness of sin
- B. Forgives undeserving sinners
- C. Predicts punishment for sin

"In this way they always heap up their sins to the limit. The wrath of God has come upon them at last." *1 Thessalonians 2:16*

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For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes