

The Church is Alive.

August 2nd, 2015, Gospel Meeting, Miyota
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生ける教会

2015年8月2日、御代田福音集会

ゴットホルド・ベック

1 Thessalonians

1:1 From: Paul, Silvanus, and Timothy. To: The church of the Thessalonians in union with God the Father and the Lord Jesus, the Messiah. May grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus, the Messiah, be yours!

1:2 We always thank God for all of you when we mention you in our prayers.

1:3 In the presence of our God and Father, we constantly remember how your faith is active, your love is hard at work, and your hope in our Lord Jesus the Messiah is enduring.

1:4 Brothers whom God loves, we know that he has chosen you,

1:5 for the gospel we brought did not come to you in words only, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction. Indeed, you know what kind of people we proved to be while we were with you, acting on your behalf.

1:6 You became imitators of us and of the Lord. In spite of a great deal of suffering, you welcomed the word with the joy that the Holy Spirit produces.

1:7 As a result, you became a model for all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.

1:8 From you the word of the Lord has spread out not only in Macedonia and Achaia, but also in every place where your faith in God has become known. As a result, we do not need to say anything about it.

1:9 For people keep telling us what kind of welcome you gave us and how you turned away from idols to serve a living and true God

1:10 and to wait for his Son whom he raised from the dead to come back from heaven. This Jesus is the one who rescues us from the coming wrath.

In my last sermon, we had an overview of the entire First Epistle to the Thessalonians. Today, I would like to take a closer look into the first chapter of this Epistle. This letter was written around AD 50 in Corinth. This was actually the first letter Paul wrote.

According to the Bible, Paul proclaimed the gospel on three Sabbaths and explained to the listeners about Jesus. As a result, a group of believers was born in Thessaloniki. They had sincere faith and true love, which made Paul feel very grateful.

I think this chapter 1 can be best titled as "The Church That is Alive." Of course, we can see this

chapter from some other perspective. For example, as we learned last week, it answers our question as to how the awareness of the Advent of Jesus helps us to return to the Lord. This chapter gives an answer that it helps us by giving us a lively hope. This church did not remain exactly as it was created; instead it took its roots deep in the ground. Believers in this church grew well, refused to compromise and always took an adamant attitude.

This church is characterized by its extremely fast growth. The Bible says that this church is chosen(1:8), that it is related to the Advent(1:10), purification and sanctification(4:1-3) as well as the Holy Spirit(1:5-6, 4:8, 5:19), which implies that the church in Thessaloniki did not remain as it was born, but grew to be a respectable and mature church, which satisfied the will of God.

This first chapter is, after all, filled with Paul's prayer of gratitude for the brothers and sisters in Thessaloniki for having returned to the Lord God. Here, I would like to discuss this chapter with you through five questions.

Firstly, what was special about the church in Thessaloniki? It was a perfect and active church and thus, a church that was constantly evolving. What made this church so special was that they stood firm on the word of the Lord. It placed primary importance on the word of God. There is a blessing wherever his word is respected. The Lord will certainly be glorified.

The expression "his word" is used three times in this chapter in verses 5, 6 and 8. This church brought great joy not only to Paul, but to Jesus too. It was literally an exemplary church.

Unfortunately, I must say that our assembly cannot be called an exemplary church. Because not all brothers and sisters are standing firm on the word of the Lord and neither are they filled with his word. Very often we pay more attention to our own concerns, the opinion of others or even to the whisper of the devil rather than to the word of the Lord, don't we? When we refuse to bend our ears to these things, but respect nothing but the word of the Lord, we will have abundant blessings.

The second question is how the word of the Lord affected this church. As implied in chapter 1, verse 5, the word of God accomplished truly significant work in the church of Thessaloniki. Paul proclaimed the gospel with the help of the Holy Spirit. The gospel does not refer to any specific teaching; it points to Jesus himself.

It can be seen from chapter 1, verse 6 that they all accepted his word. They did not just listen to his word, but they certainly accepted his word in their hearts. Unless we accept his word and internalize its

meaning for our lives, we will not be able to experience the power of his word.

It is stated in chapter 1, verse 8 that, "From you the word of the Lord has spread out." We can see from this verse how his word was proclaimed and spread out wide from this church. I guess that this verse indicates the process of growth of healthy churches. That is to say, his word is proclaimed and spread forward, then that word is accepted by the audience, by whom it is spread even further; this is what typically happens to active churches. Of course, the word of the Lord refers not to any specific doctrine or teaching; it is Jesus himself. The word of God is Jesus himself. This truth is clearly explained in the Gospel According to John.

John

1:1 In the beginning, the Word existed. The Word was with God, and the Word was God.

1:2 He existed in the beginning with God.

1:3 Through him all things were made, and apart from him nothing was made that has been made.

1:4 In him was life, and that life brought light to humanity.

Actually, these verses may sound unclear and do not make a lot of sense. What does 'the Word' refer to? It is explained in the verse 14.

1:14 The Word became flesh and lived among us. We gazed on his glory, the kind of glory that belongs to the Father's unique Son, who is full of grace and truth.

The word refers, not to the Bible alone, but Jesus himself. Thus, in here we can replace 'the word' with 'the Lord Jesus'. This sentence makes very clear sense through the interpretation that Jesus was proclaimed strongly, that Jesus was accepted and that Jesus was spread out.

Jesus himself should be placed at the center of true proclamation. Let us look at the famous chapter 15 of the First Epistle to Corinthians, which is also known as the book of resurrection;

1 Corinthians

15:3 For I passed on to you the most important points that I received: The Messiah died for our sins according to the Scriptures,

15:4 he was buried, he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures—and is still alive!

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Thirdly, how was the word of God proclaimed in Thessaloniki? It can be seen from verse 5 that the gospel was proclaimed with power, with the Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction. It clearly tells us that the Holy Spirit and Paul worked as one. This exactly is the secret to be blessed.

Paul was always filled with hunger and thirst for working with the Holy Spirit. It was for this reason that the Holy Spirit came upon him and worked on him. The Holy Spirit only comes upon and works with those who obey him sincerely. It is explained in the Acts of the Apostles.

Acts

5:30 The God of our ancestors raised Jesus to life after you killed him by hanging him on a tree.

5:31 God has exalted to his right hand this very man as our Leader and Savior in order to extend repentance and forgiveness of sins to Israel.

5:32 We are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who keep on obeying him.

It is written, "The Holy Spirit, whom God has given to those who keep on obeying him." The work of the Holy Spirit is absolutely necessary for the growth of churches. Wherever we can work with the Holy Spirit today, the same thing will happen as it happened in Thessaloniki.

Fourth question: what did Paul say about accepting the word of God? It can be seen in verses 5 and 6 that, "not only did they proclaim the word of God through the Holy Spirit, but they accepted his word through the Holy Spirit." Indeed, it is stated that they welcomed the word with the joy that the Holy Spirit produced.

It is telling us that the Holy Spirit works actively, not only when we proclaim the word of God, but also when we accept it. And, to accept the word of God is to accept Jesus. True faith is to nothing but to accept the Lord Jesus.

His word is not something to understand, but it is something to accept. The word of God is not something to read, but it is something to consume, said a famous philosopher Hilty. He said that what is read will be easily forgotten while what is consumed will give us strength. Whether we merely read his word or we truly consume and digest it makes an extremely profound influence on our lives.

Those who merely read the word of God and do not step further will eventually perish. Contrarily, those who truly consume his word, taste it thoroughly and digest it will have eternal salvation.

For example, marriage brings a great change in that two people become one family, but a matter of whether we accept Jesus or not has a far greater effect to our lives that is beyond comparison. Acceptance is a choice made by our own will. It is written in this first chapter from the Gospel according to John, which is quoted so often.

John

1:12 However, to all who received him, those believing in his name, he gave authority to become God's children,

As we can see from this verse 12, to receive him is equivalent to believing in his name. Therefore, having faith is a matter of choice for each person. Faith should not be an emotion that sneaks into your heart while you are unaware of it, or are in a vague state of mind about believing. It is a decision that each person has to make on their own.

Therefore, we should make a decision first and then act. This is the step to follow. When the prodigal son had fallen so low that he had to live with pigs, he did not wait until some sweet feeling came into his heart. He made up his mind to return to his father. Faith is a decision to make; it is a decision to admit our misery and the pain of our sins honestly, and then to accept humbly the gift provided by the Lord.

The word of the Lord is living today and has strength. It is explained in chapter 4 of Hebrew.

Hebrew

4:12 For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any double-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow, as it judges the thoughts and purposes of the heart.

The word of God lives powerfully and thus has a great effect on the life of those who accept it. People in Thessaloniki were born into new life by accepting the word of God. This way, the word of God is accepted by believers as a seed to a new life; we cannot be reborn through our emotion, feeling or comprehension. Regeneration is made possible only through the following process. First, you have faith in God (chapter 1, verse 8), you return to the Lord and turn away from all idols (chapter 1, verse 9), then you accept the Holy Spirit (chapter 4, verse 8).

1 Thessalonians

4:8 Therefore, whoever rejects this instruction is not rejecting human authority but God, who gives you his Holy Spirit.

When people accept his word, they will come to believe in the Lord. Consequently, they will throw all idol worship away, come back to the only true God and let the Holy Spirit inside.

Fifth question: what kind of life appeared in Thessaloniki? In what way was new life revealed in there? Now we know that the assembly in Thessaloniki obtained a new life through the word of God. Many things are explained in chapter 1, verses 2 and 3 regarding the new life.

1 Thessalonians [New International Version]

1:2 We always thank God for all of you and continually mention you in our prayers.

1:3 We 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.

Here, three things are pointed out; firstly, their work produced by faith, secondly, their labor prompted by love and thirdly, their endurance inspired by hope.

It began with their work produced by faith. Indeed, true faith eventually bears rich fruit by itself. Faith is certainly the strength required to live a new life. For this reason, brothers and sisters in Thessaloniki did not just spend their lives as mere believers. The faith within them was shown in their actions. They separated themselves from all kinds of idols and began to serve the true God.

Next, let us quickly look at the expression, labor prompted by love. If the faith is the strength for our new life, I would say that the love points to the warmth that embraces our new life. Not only did they love the Lord, but they suffered for the Lord because of their love for the Lord. In actuality, their love was manifested in the form of their service to the true living God.

Finally, let us think about the expression, their endurance inspired by hope. If the faith is strength for our new life and the love is warmth in our new life, we can say that the hope is a light that shines in our new life.

They (brothers and sisters in Thessaloniki) did not just wish for the salvation, but also boldly accepted the persecution for their hope to come true. Not only did they abandon all idol worship to serve the true living God; they eagerly waited for the return of the Lord Jesus from their hearts. Believers in Thessaloniki are characterized by their well-tested faith, their sincere love and lively hope.

The life of all believers should be like this. That is to say, once they are saved, they should begin to serve the true Lord and always wait eagerly for his return. The good news about the coming of Jesus was spread out wide through the brothers in Thessaloniki.

Because of their efforts, people in Macedonia and Achaia too came to know about Jesus. Knowing the word of God and spreading it are deeply related to each other. As it comes deeper into your heart, you will obtain more strength to spread it out. Active churches are those which never stop proclaiming the word of the Lord.

According to the degree of how much we accept the word of God and obey it, more people will be led to

the Lord and saved through us. “You should be my witnesses.” This word shows us what Jesus wants us to be. When any church stops spreading lively testimonies, they lose the authority given to churches.

When the Lord saw the church in Thessaloniki, he was satisfied from the bottom of his heart. Contrarily, when he saw the church in Ephesus, unfortunately, he had to be disappointed. He had to express his feeling this way;

Revelation

2:3 You have endured and suffered because of my name, yet you have not grown weary.

2:4 However, I have this against you: You have abandoned the love you had at first.

2:5 Therefore, remember how far you have fallen.

Repent and go back to what you were doing at first. If you don't, I will come to you and remove your lamp stand from its place—unless you repent.

To remove their lamp stand means to stop testifying for them, which implies that this church will eventually fall apart. The church in Ephesus did not repent enough then, finally they were not even allowed to exist as a church. It is apparent that if our assembly stops repenting of sin, it will have to fall apart in the same way. It is for this reason that we should never stop listening carefully to the word of the Lord and obey it.

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