

## STANDING FIRM

### IV. “God’s Word at Work in Us”

6-3-07  
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1 Thess. 2: 13-16

TEXT: *...the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*

– 1 Thess. 2:13c

#### INTRODUCTION

Eliot Osowitt planned to kill himself. Why not? It was Christmas Eve and his wife had just locked him out of his house. But, who could blame her? He had not been a good father or husband. He went to a motel room with a gun. There was an open Gideon Bible on the TV. In anger, he knocked it to the floor and kicked it under the bed, but it wouldn’t go— the bed was on a solid frame all the way to the floor. It was open to Jesus’ words in John 14:27,

*Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you; not as the world giveth give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled neither let it be afraid.*

Those words, God’s words, seized Eliot’s heart and he continued reading. In fact he spent three days reading the Bible. On Sunday he attended church with his wife and gave his life to Christ. God called Eliot into the ministry and today he is a pastor in North Carolina.

That is an example of the power of God’s Word. When I was reading through 1 and 2 Thessalonians a few weeks ago with the idea of maybe preaching sermons from them, I was caught by this phrase in our text, describing a process, *...the word of God, which is at work in you who believe.*

#### RECEPTIVE HEARTS

Remember, these Thessalonians were brand new Christians. Paul’s ministry there was very short, only a few weeks. And they were immediately thrown into intense persecution with Paul fleeing in the middle of the night. So you can imagine his concern about whether they would continue on in the faith. Here now is the second time in this letter he expresses his thankfulness to God for them and confidence in God’s power to keep them steadfast. Here, that confidence is rooted in the way they responded to the Word of God:

*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. (1 Thess 2:13)*

They had receptive hearts to God’s Word and *accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God.* Here in Scripture they had something solid to hang onto and form and shape their lives into this new Christian way. Paul is saying that, even though I’m not there to teach you, God’s Word is sufficient and powerful enough to guide your new lives in Christ. And remember, they did not have the New Testament yet as we do.

The power of God’s Word alone can be seen in another story from the Gideons. A man in the

Central African Republic was going on a business trip. He faced an important decision: should he take his wife or his girlfriend? He decided to take his girlfriend. At the hotel, as she unpacked, he sat down and noticed a blue book on the table. He picked it up and found it was a New Testament placed by the Gideons. He read a few verses and then announced to his girlfriend, “We can’t be here like this. This is wrong!” So she said, “Fine! I’m going home.” She called a cab and walked out. He had to stay for the business meetings, but every spare moment he read the New Testament, and then he took it with him. God healed the relationship with his wife and today he and his family are Christians. And, by the way, he joined the Gideons.

The Gideons International is an association of Christian business and professional men who, since 1899 have been distributing Bibles around the world with confidence in the power of God’s Word and the promise of Isaiah 55:11–

*so is my word that goes out from my mouth:*

*It will not return to me empty,*

*but will accomplish what I desire*

*and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

Our church supports The Gideons through our mission budget. Gideons are involved in 181 countries, publishing the Scriptures in 83 languages, simply placing Bibles in the designated traffic lanes of life– hotels, hospitals, nursing homes, to students in schools, to the armed forces, to prisoners, etc.– wherever they are allowed in. Last year they distributed 63 million Bibles and since 1908, they have distributed 1.3 **billion** copies of God’s Word. Every second, they distribute or place two Bibles. A New Testament can be published by them for \$1.35 and a complete Bible for \$5.00. Our budget amount that we give is \$300 annually, so that provides 222 New Testaments or 60 Bibles. You can always channel special designated gifts to the Gideons through the church that will go in addition to our budgeted amount.

How can “just a Bible” with no one presenting the teaching be so powerful? It is because, as Paul reminds us, it is not the word of men but the Word of God. Most of us know the Bible is inspired, but don’t forget what that *really* means. Later, in 2 Tim 3:16-17, Paul tells us:

*All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

I like that the NIV uses a literal rendering of the Greek word here, sometimes translated “inspired” with “God-breathed.” I know I say it quite often, but it is important, the Greek word for “spirit” and “breath” are the same, *pneuma*. Now, we cannot speak without our breath going with the words. So, “God-breathed” means as God’s speaks, His Spirit (the Holy Spirit) goes with the Word to accomplish what it says. God spoke all of creation into being in Genesis 1. And, the way it all happened– the agent bringing creation into being– was the Holy Spirit:

*...and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters* (Gen. 1:2). Later, the Psalmist declares,

*By the word of the LORD were the heavens made,  
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.* (Ps 33:6)

That’s how Eliot’s life was saved and the business man from Central Africa’s family was saved

and that's the source of Paul's confidence. This is God's Word, God-breathed, God-infused with the power of the Holy Spirit. So it is that J.B. Phillips in translating the New Testament said he felt it was so pulsing with life and power that he felt like an electrician working with wiring while the power was still on.

As God's Word to us, it is also truth without error. It is the standard, the Manufacturer's Handbook, defining the way things work in the universe and in humanity. There are fixed, immutable moral laws. The Ten Commandments and the laws of love and forgiveness as well as the other teachings in the Bible about behavior are eternal and unchanging. Jesus affirms, God's Word will never pass away (Lk 21:33).

In Ghana, the Gideons distributed 300,000 Bibles in two weeks. A teacher told the Gideons, "This will be our textbook." But in just that one city, an additional 600,000 Bibles are needed for the schools. Think of the impact that can have.

Most of us understand the importance of Scripture in teaching, and the need to conform our lives to it. But, I want to focus now upon how it is that this Word of God *is at work in you who believe* (1 Thess 2:13).

### **AT WORK IN YOU**

Because of the power of the Holy Spirit working in and through the Word of God, it is able to do marvelous things within us. Heb 4:12-13 gives us a graphic image of this:

*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.*

God's Word penetrating deeply, dividing between soul and spirit. Can you figure out yourself and what is your soul and what is your spirit? Can you sort out and discern between the thoughts and attitudes in our hearts? God's Word with His Spirit does this, and if you've been a Christian very long, you've experienced this marvelous clarity God's Word can bring. And then, the revealing to us of our sin— things we never even thought of or had ignored for years— now uncovered by God's Word quickened by the Spirit. We don't dissect the Bible. The Bible dissects us.

But there's another dimension of God's Word working within us I want to focus on for the rest of the sermon: it's role in feeding us. The image is rather startling as used in Scripture when God actually commands the prophets Ezekiel and John to "eat this book" (Ez. 3:3, Rev. 10:10). And Jeremiah says,

*When your words came, I ate them;  
they were my joy and my heart's delight,  
for I bear your name,  
O LORD God Almighty. (Jer 15:16)*

However, as we explore this in our imaginations, there is a wonderful truth here. Nutritionists tell

us “You are what you eat.” In matters of mind and heart, what we study and meditate on is what we eat. Think about chewing, swallowing, digesting, assimilating, and metabolizing in our cells and muscles the ways, the attitudes, the character, the very life of Jesus. This is also the way God has designed His Word to work within us.

I think we understand the study part better than the meditation part, so let me give you something I’d like you to try this week if it is not already a part of your practice. Take a verse or two or a short passage of Scripture and just let its words and truths work their way deep within you. I listed some in the bulletin– but you can use any significant Scripture in the Bible. Let me use one of these as an example, Rom. 12:1-2–

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God– this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is– his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

What I mean by letting it work into you– being metabolized into your system– is just prayerfully reflecting on the phrases and truths, asking the Holy Spirit to shape your inner life according to them. So, one day I may focus on the phrase, *to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God– this is your spiritual act of worship*. When I’ve been trying to diet, I’ve used this, prayerfully asking God to break my bondage to food and lay my appetite on the altar “a living sacrifice.” But then, “body” here means our whole being. So another time it might be my mind, my affections, or the things I do. Maybe another time I’ll think about *in view of God's mercy*– realizing everything needs to be anchored with gratitude for God’s mercy. Again, it may be *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind*. How am I “conforming?” How do I need to be “transformed?” How about renewing my mind? Then, that last sentence, *Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is– his good, pleasing and perfect will*. What does that mean for me?

That only touches the surface. When doing this, it is handy to memorize the verses you’re using. It gives you access to it to work it over inside you to let it do its work at other times while exercising or driving. You don’t have to memorize it. You can just copy it down to have it handy to carry with you. But I urge you to try this. It is powerful as we let God’s Word do its work within us.

Singing God’s Word is another way of meditating and working truth deeply within. Many of our contemporary songs are quotes of Scripture. Recently we’ve been singing a (newer to us) chorus, “Blessed be the Name” taken from Job. 1:21, where Job expresses his continuing trust in spite of the loss of his family, his home, all that he has,

*the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.*

In singing that chorus with this Scripture, it has kneaded it into my spirit in heart-shaping ways.

## CONCLUSION

One final story from the Gideons. In El Salvador there was a school distribution in both the morning and afternoon sessions. But in the afternoon, they found some of the Scriptures they had

passed out in the morning had been ripped up. As the Gideon distribution team were on their way home that day, they stopped at a store on the edge of town. A young man was sitting on the steps of the store with a single page torn out of a Gideon New Testament. The young man had tears running down his face and asked these Gideons if they could tell him more about this man Jesus? A couple of the Gideons stayed outside and talked to him while others went into the store. In the store, an older man was standing there crying. They approached him and asked if something was wrong. He said, pointing outside, “My son out there— I’ve never seen him cry before. I don’t know what’s wrong.” That day, both father and son were saved.

Friends, this Word is powerful. It is easy for us to forget just how powerful. Don’t just read it. Eat it, meditate on it, assimilate it, and metabolize its truths into your thinking, attitudes, and everything else in your life. Take a verse or two for a whole week and try my experiment of letting the words work their way into your inmost being. Within a few days you’ll experience a fresh the wonder, as Paul says, of *the word of God, which is at work in you who believe*.