

The Work of the Word

Scripture: 2 Timothy 3:16-4:5

This is beyond overwhelming. I had prepared something to say; I don't know if I can recover it at this point. My heart and mind are flooded with so many incredible thoughts after this amazing time together. Thanks to everybody - thanks to Michael, and thanks to all those of you who made this happen here at Grace Church. I am a singularly blessed person. I have no idea why the Lord chose me and prepared me and set my course, put me in the family that he put me in, and put me in touch with this church when I was in my twenties, really too young for the responsibility. But here I was, February 9, 1969, with absolutely no idea of what the future would hold, but knowing I wanted to teach the Word of God.

No pastor has - I can't imagine - ever had a more wonderful pastoral ministry than the Lord has given me. It's not something I have earned; it's not something I deserve. The Lord has overcome my weaknesses and my failures and singularly blessed me in spite of them by bringing me here. I have never had a split-second desire to be anywhere else. This is my home; this is my life. You are my love. You are my joy and crown of rejoicing, and we will share this fellowship forever in heaven. We'll let some other folks up there join us, but we'll be together up there.

I thank you for being my life, for all your gifts and all your sacrifices, all your love, all your care for me. I cannot imagine a more wonderful life. Had its challenges, some of my own making. But the Lord has stood by us, hasn't He, through all of these challenges. We had no idea where this ministry would go, and the Lord has blessed your efforts. I come back, stand in this pulpit week after week all these years, and you take the ministry and spread it around the world. This is how the body of Christ is supposed to function. So, first, thank you. Thanks to all the volunteers. And again, special thanks to you, Michael, for being behind all this wonderful expression of love.

I have to say to the most wonderful gift that God ever gave me, my wife Patricia. Thank you, honey. I love you to death; I think you know that. It's one thing to be preached to on Sundays; it's another thing to be preached to every day. So she's demonstrated a lot of grace.

How blessed am I to have my children and my grandchildren even here today. Love to all of you. Thank the Lord for all of you. It's a joy to have my sister and her husband with us this morning, Jeanette, and many other friends, some of whom I've seen and some of whom I haven't seen because Michael has kept me locked up all morning; and hopefully I'll be able to get around to see you all soon.

This is not a retirement. I'll be back next Sunday and we'll be in 2 Thessalonians. I really want to just point you this morning to the Word of God, because what we have all experienced is the work of the Word, and that is the appropriate theme for our celebration. There is a text that has been noted with regard to this - it's 2 Timothy chapter 3. You can turn to it. I'm only going to make a sort of general reference to it, and then there are some other portions of Scripture that I want to bring before you.

In 2 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 14 we read the Word of God: "You, however, continue in the things you have learned and become convinced of, knowing from whom you have learned them, and that from childhood you have known the sacred writings which are able to give you the wisdom that leads to salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness; so that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

“I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction.”

Let me stop there and say that verse 2 has been my lifelong mandate: “Preach the word. Preach the word in season and out of season.” That means all the time, and that is what I have endeavored to do. I come into this pulpit on a Sunday and through these years I’ve preached two or three and sometimes four times on a Sunday, and the early years began on Wednesday. Other times throughout this half a century I have preached across this country and pretty much around the world, and always I have preached the Word, always I have opened the Word of God. I have really nothing to say of significance on my own. I stand solemnly charged or commanded in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead - and that includes me - by His appearing in His kingdom. And I have been commanded to preach the Word. So I have endeavored to do that to the best of my ability.

I’m grateful that this church has allowed me to have the time to do the preparation, to spend three days or so every week of this half century just studying the Word of God; and I can tell you now, there has not been one weary moment in fifty years in the Word of God. I’ve had weary moments with my own weakness. I’ve had weariness with some of the challenges. I’ve had weariness with some of the people that are difficult, some of the issues that we face. I have never grown weary of the Word of God. It is life-giving, and it has done that in our church. So I want to borrow some words from David, Psalm 138: “I will give thanks with all my heart; I will sing praises to You. I will bow down toward Your holy temple and give thanks to You for Your lovingkindness and Your truth; for You have magnified Your word according to Your name.”

God has exalted His Word equal to His name. When we exalt His Word, we exalt Him. True worship is the exaltation of the Word of God, and we have done that together for half a century.

The story of this church is not the story of a man; it’s not the result of the work of a man. It isn’t the work of many men and many women that is the record of this church to be told. It really is the story of the work of the Word of God through the Spirit of God. As Martin Luther said, “I did nothing; the Word did everything.”

The Scripture has dominated the pulpits and lecterns and classrooms and conversations and homes and lives of this congregation for half a century, and we have experienced the reality of Isaiah’s words: “For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return there without watering the earth and making it bear and sprout, and furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater; so will My word be which goes forth from My mouth; it will not return to Me empty, without accomplishing what I desire, and without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it.” How marvelous is that to know that when you proclaim the Word of God it is predetermined what God will do with it.

We know what the work of the Word is, as we just read. It brings about salvation. It brings about sanctification. It brings about spiritual growth. It fills the heart with hope. It pours truth into the mind and the life. It empowers for the living of that truth.

In Acts 20:32, the apostle Paul said to the elders at Ephesus, “And now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” The Word of God is able to build you up, and that’s what we have lived these fifty years to see.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul writes, “We constantly thank God that when you received the word of God which you have heard from me, you accepted it not as the word of men, but for what it really is, the word of God, which also performs its work in you who believe.” Hebrews 4:12 says, “The word of God is alive and powerful, sharper than any two-edged sword.”

As a church, we have come to believe that the Word of God is divine revelation. All Scripture is inspired by God. We have come to believe that that revelation was placed through the minds of the writers of Scripture so that men didn’t write their own ideas, but holy men were moved by the Holy Spirit to write the Scripture. We have come to the conviction from studying the Scripture that the law of the Lord is perfect. It is without error, that as Proverbs 30 says, “Every word of God is pure.” We have come to the conviction that it is authoritative, as it says in Isaiah 1 and verse 2, “Hear, O heavens, and give ear, O earth; for the Lord has spoken.” When God speaks, we listen. We have found the Word of God to be sufficient; it covers everything that we could possibly need.

I could never close this day without reading that revelation from Psalm 19, verse 7, “The law of Lord is perfect, converting the soul. The testimony of the Lord is sure, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the Lord is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the Lord are true; they are righteous altogether.” That is the sufficiency of Scripture.

We have come to understand that the Bible is also definitive, even determinative. “He that is of God hears God’s words. You therefore do not hear them, because you are not of God.” Those who belong to God hear God’s Word; they hunger for it. Those who have no interest in it are not of God.

We have come to believe that the Bible is clear, that as Psalm 119 says, “It is a lamp unto our feet and a light unto our path.” And we have come to find that the Bible is also ultimately satisfying. We find in it what John says: “These things are written so that our joy may be made complete.” We find our joy in the Word of God.

We come Sunday after Sunday after Sunday. The Word of God is strong and powerful and penetrating and convicting. There’s rebuke and there’s restoration. There’s conviction and there’s comfort. But there’s joy in all of it. We find our joy in the Word of God.

I could break down how we feel about the Word of God into four simple terms. Recognition: we know what it means. Conviction: we believe what it says. Submission: we eagerly obey it. And the final one, affection: we love it. We love the Word of God.

Psalm 1 says, “How blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers! But his delight is in the law of the Lord.” That would define us. Our “delight is in the law of the Lord.” We’re not here to be entertained. We’re not here to be an audience to some kind of show going on up here. We’re here to be fed the Word of God because that’s what we delight in.

Psalm 40, verse 8 says, “I delight to do Your will, O my God,” – Why? – “because Your Law is written in my heart.” It’s a heart delight. It’s not a moment’s experience. It isn’t that somehow there’s an emotional uplift when you show up on Sunday. We live in the delight of the Word of God. It rises up from within our hearts; and that’s true all the time. And it’s excitingly amplified when we come together collectively like this. That’s why we sing the way we sing. We don’t sing about ourselves; we sing about the Word of God and all that’s revealed there, and we sing with joy.

Psalm 119, verse 97 sums it up: “O how I love Your law! It is my meditation all the day.” That’s how we live our lives, isn’t it? Psalm 19:10, “Your words are more precious to me than fine gold and sweeter than the honeycomb.” Job said, “I have treasured the words of His mouth more than my necessary food.” We love the Word of God.

First John chapter 5 spells it out. John writes, “By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God and observe His commandments. For this is the love of God, that we keep His commandments; and His commandments are not burdensome.” We love the law; we love to obey the law of God; we love to proclaim the Word of God. That’s why from this church the Word of God has covered the earth.

Jesus was speaking to His disciples in John 6 and He said, after the crowd had left Him, ““Will you also go away?”” to which Peter, responding for the whole group, said, ““To whom shall we go? You and You alone have the words of eternal life.”” There’s nowhere else to go; there’s no one else with the words of eternal life. That’s why Grace Church is what it is; that’s why you’re here. I know why people come to this church and I know why they don’t. They come because their souls crave the satisfying joys of Scripture; they don’t come because that is not their interest.

We are God’s people. We are a redeemed church, spiritually alive, who hunger for His Word, because it alone feeds our souls, satisfies our longings, and conforms us to the Christ we love. We are what we are, not because of a man; we are what we are because of a book: Scripture. And because we are so engulfed in the Word of God, we understand doctrine and we understand worship. We understand spiritual character, and we understand spiritual life and spiritual ministry. Where do people go to find that? It’s only available where the Word of God dominates.

We love the Bible. Now why is that the case? Is it because somehow we’re smarter than other people who go to church? Is it because somehow we are more spiritual? Why is it that we have this love? Let me begin by having you look at the first chapter of 1 Thessalonians. Here’s a start to answer that question, “Why do we love the Word the way we do? Why does it do its work in us the way it does?”

Paul, writing to the Thessalonians in chapter 1 - we’ll pick it up at verse 2 - says, “We give thanks to God always for all of you, making mention of you in our prayers; constantly bearing in mind your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ in the presence of our God and Father, knowing, brethren beloved by God, His choice of you.”

Hmmm. How did we become the people we are? How did we become a church like Thessalonica? And I often say Grace Church is like the Thessalonians’ church. How did this happen? How did we become a people who does the work of faith and the labor of love and the steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ and in the presence of our God and Father? Because we were chosen. We were chosen.

Verse 5, “The gospel didn’t come to us in word only, it came in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction,” – Why? – “because we were chosen.” Verse 6, “You became imitators of us and of the Lord, having received the word in much tribulation with the joy of the Holy Spirit.” How did that happen? We were chosen. “You became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia.” And in verse 8 it says, “And beyond that, in every place.” How did that happen? Because we were chosen.

Verse 9, “You turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God.” How did that happen. We were chosen. Verse 10, “We’re waiting for His Son from heaven, whom He raised from the dead, Jesus, who rescues us from the wrath to come.” How is that possible? We were chosen.

Paul gives us some insight into that in 1 Corinthians chapter 1; so let's look at that for just a brief few moments. In this very rich portion of Scripture – starting in chapter 1, verse 18, running down through chapter 2 – we have a contrast between those who do not hunger for the Scripture, who do not believe the Bible, and those who do. And just lightly touching on what this great text says, here is why non-Christians, non-believers do not accept the Bible.

Verse 18 says, “The word of the cross” – the divine message, the center of which is the cross and Christ – “is foolishness to them.” The message is unreasonable. Greek term is moron. It is moronic. It is stupid. It does not suit human reason, this idea of a crucified Jew, crucified by the Romans; being God, the eternal God, the Creator of the universe; then rising from the dead, being the only Savior in the world, the only true God, the only true Redeemer. Therefore Christianity's the only true religion; all others are lies out of hell. To the unregenerate mind, that is unreasonable.

People don't believe, secondly, because the truth is not only unreasonable, it's unattainable. Look at verse 19: “For it is written, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will set aside.’” In other words, you can't get to this truth by being wise and clever.

“Where is the wise man?” verse 20. “Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world? For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know Him, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.” People on their own in the world cannot attain to this knowledge. The Word of God is unreasonable, it is unattainable. Jeremiah said, “The wise men, behold, they have rejected the word of the Lord, so what wisdom do they have?”

Thirdly, even unattractive. The message isn't what people are looking for, verse 22, “The Jews ask a sign, Greeks search for wisdom. We preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness.” The message is unattractive. They want something more philosophical, do the

Gentiles. The Jews want a sign - a sign in the sky, if you will - because not even the sign of the resurrection convinced them. We offer no signs. And this is not some kind of complex, erudite, esoteric philosophy that might tantalize the intellectuals. No; this message, this simple message of the Word of God, the theme is salvation, and the main person is Jesus Christ in all of Scripture. This is unreasonable, unattainable. This is also unattractive.

And then to add to the difficulty, its purveyors - us as Christians are unremarkable. Look at verse 26: “Consider your calling.” Again, a reminder that we are saved because we were called, we were chosen. We were called, called by God; that's an effectual calling into salvation. “Consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that they may nullify the things that are.”

Not only are we working with a message that is offensive, but a lot of very unremarkable people are carrying this message. Wouldn't it have been better for God if He had decided to bring to Himself the erudite, the elite, the well-known, the powerful, the influential, the educated. But He didn't do that. “Not many wise, not many mighty, not many noble.” “Not many” three times.

The majority of believers are unimpressive. They're not wise; they're not powerful; they're not noble; they don't have influence. Most of us don't have power. "Not noble" means "well-born." We're "not well-born." We don't have social rank. We're foolish, uneducated. We're weak, uninfluential. We are also "base," verse 28 says, "base." What does that mean? "Base" means – it's *agenēs* - it means "no births," "insignificant." Worse than that, "we are the things that are not." That's from the verb *eimi*, we "don't even exist." Far as the world is concerned, we don't exist.

So you've got an unreasonable message, an unattractive message, unremarkable people communicating that message. And even the preachers, fifthly, are unfashionable. Look at chapter 2: "When I came to you, brethren, I didn't come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified. I was with you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling, and my message and my preaching were not in persuasive words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith wouldn't rest on the wisdom of men, but on the power of God."

Everything seems to go against us. We're not orators. We're not the famous. We're not the influential. We're not the powerful. We're not the philosophical. We're not the intellectual. We're unremarkable, and the culture sees us that way.

There's a historian who has written seven volumes on preaching, and he has a section on me. Seven volumes on history of preaching; and I want you to hear what he wrote about me. This is a quote: "MacArthur's rhetoric is terribly out of date. But maybe he knows something the rest of us don't. Why do so many people listen to MacArthur, this product of all the wrong schools? How can he pack out a church on Sunday morning in an age in which church attendance has seriously lagged. Here is a preacher who has nothing in the way of a winning personality, good looks or charm." Thanks a lot.

"Here is a preacher who offers us nothing in the way of sophisticated, homiletical packaging. No one would suggest that he is a master of the art of oratory. What he seems to have is a witness to true authority. He recognizes in Scripture the Word of God. And when he preaches, it is the Scripture that one hears. It is not that the words of John MacArthur are so interesting as it is that the Word of God is of surpassing interest. That is why we listen." I think he got it. Could have been a little kinder in the process.

So you understand, while there are lots of people who are happy to listen to my teaching, the perspective of the world is there's nothing in me at all to cause that to happen. For all of these reasons, people don't believe the Bible. And you can add the reality of fallen reason, natural darkness, satanic blindness, divine alienation. And people don't believe the Bible, and those who have some kind of tacit acceptance of the Bible have no hunger for its truths and find no joy in its depths.

So why do we believe? Why do we believe? Here it comes, chapter 2, verse 6: "Yet we do speak wisdom among those who are mature." Here's the first reason: because we're "mature." What does that word mean, *teleios*? "Complete." Why do we believe? Because we're "complete," we're fully developed - we're developed by God into unique persons.

You know, Paul's great ministry passion in Colossians. At the end of chapter 1 he says this: "We proclaim Him," – meaning Christ – "admonishing every man and teaching every man with all wisdom, so that we may present every man complete in Christ." So we are in Christ, we are complete. That's the first reason we love Scripture.

“In Him,” says Colossians 2, “we are complete. And in Him are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.” And we are complete in Him.

Secondly, we believe the Bible because, verse 7, we are predestined to believe it. “We speak God’s wisdom in a mystery, the hidden wisdom which God predestined before the ages to our glory.” Did you see that? Do you know why you believe the Bible? Because God before time began predestined you to believe it.

Go back to verse 27 in chapter 1. “God has chosen.” “God has chosen.” Verse 8, “God has chosen.” Verse 30, “By His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption.” It’s His doing - His choosing, His predestining, His calling. And He chose specific kinds of people. He chose the foolish, the weak, the base, the despised, the nobodies, so that no one may boast before God.

We don’t believe because we’re smarter than other people; we believe because we’ve been made complete in Christ, because we are the predestined. And we are predestined to eternal glory. Predestination before time began had in mind eternal glory after time was ended.

Thirdly, verses 8-9, because we love Him. Verse 8, “the wisdom which none of the rulers of this age has understood. If they understood it, they wouldn’t have crucified the Lord of glory.” They did that because they hated Him. “But it is written, ‘Things which eye has not seen, ear has not heard,’” – they’re not visible by any empirical methodology; divine truth can’t be known empirically – “and which have not entered the heart of man,” – divine truth cannot be known instinctively, intuitively, internally; it’s not available – “but God has given it for those” – end of verse 9 – “who love Him.”

We have been made complete in Christ. We have been predestined to eternal glory. We love Him. We love Him because He first loved us. That’s why we believe.

Fourthly, because we’ve received the Holy Spirit, verse 10: “God has revealed them through the Spirit; for the Spirit searches all things, even the depths of God. For who among men knows the thoughts of a man except the spirit of the man which is in him? Even so the thoughts of God knows no one except the Spirit of God. Now we have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who’s from God, that we may know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words.”

In every verse it says, “We’re taught by the Spirit. We’re taught by the Spirit. We’re taught by the Spirit.” We have been given the Holy Spirit. First John 2 says, “He is an anointing which we have from God, so that we need not depend on human wisdom.” Paul says to the Galatians, “It was the desire of the Lord. The Lord was pleased to reveal His Son to me.”

And then God gave us the truth-teacher, the Holy Spirit, to live in us. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit; He lives in us. The Spirit of Christ lives in us. That’s why we understand the Scripture; He’s the truth-teacher. The author of Scripture lives in us and is the interpreter of what He inspired.

Fifthly, Paul says, because we are therefore spiritual. Look at verses 14-15: “A natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God, for they’re foolishness to him; he cannot understand them, because they’re spiritually discerned. But he who is spiritual appraises” – or discerns – “all things, yet he himself is discerned by no one.” The world doesn’t understand us; they can’t figure us out; they can’t discern who we are. But we, because we are spiritual - pneumatikos - because we are endowed with spiritual life, are no longer in the natural, fallen condition. We have been made new creations. We’ve been born again, regenerate. We now possess spiritual life, the life of God. And we anakrinō, “we judge” everything by the Word of God and by the understanding of the Word of God that is vouchsafed to us by the Holy Spirit.

And one other thing; this is so amazing. Verse 16, “we have the mind of Christ.” “Who has known the mind of the Lord, that he will instruct Him?” (from Isaiah 40). The answer: “We have the mind of Christ.” What an amazing statement.

Why do we love the Scripture? Because we think the way Christ thinks. Why? Because we have His mind. What does that mean? As a believer you don’t have the body of Christ, but you have the mind of Christ. The only part of Christ that’s in you is the mind of Christ. We are literally the residence of Christ. We have His mind, His understanding, His judgment, His thinking.

Why do we believe the Bible? Because we have been made complete in Christ. We have been predestined to eternal glory, because we have been transformed from hating Him to loving Him as a divine miracle, because He gave us His Holy Spirit who is the author and the instructor of Scripture, because He transferred us from the natural to the spiritual by making us alive and giving us eternal life, and because He gave us the mind of His Son who lives in us, and we know what He thinks.

Why are we committed to the Word of God like this? Because of the work that God has done in us. That’s why chapter 1, verse 31, ends with these words borrowed from Jeremiah: “Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.” That’s what we’re doing today, boasting in the Lord.

Psalm 34:2 says, “My soul makes its boast in the Lord; let the humble hear and be glad.” Jeremiah 9:23-24 says, “Let not a wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast of his might, let not a rich man boast of his riches; but let him who boasts boast of this, that he understands and knows Me, that I am the Lord who exercises lovingkindness, justice and righteousness on earth; for I delight in these things.”

Here we are, and all worship goes to God, all glory goes to God, all boasting goes to Him. If you feel like you’re a spectator on the outside looking through a window, you say, “I don’t have this kind of passion; I don’t have this kind of love for the Word; I don’t see that in my heart,” you need to pray this prayer, Psalm 119:18, “Open my eyes, that I may see wondrous things out of Your law.”

Father, we thank You for such a wonderful, joyous day; really the culmination of so many days of blessing and joy. All glory to You. As we honor Your Word, we honor You. You have exalted Your Word to the very heights of Your own name. We glorify You, we worship You when we lift up Your Word, when we understand it, believe it, obey it, and love it, and then spend our lives proclaiming it.

Thank You for daily, hourly providence for half a century in my life and Patricia’s and our family, and all the precious, dear, amazing, irreplaceable people that have surrounded us through all these years, whose lives You have touched who were predestined, chosen, called, redeemed, set apart for ministry here, or even from this place all across the world. All is for Your glory and Your glory alone. Thank You for letting us be witnesses to what You have done. We praise You with thankful hearts. Amen.