THE GOSPEL COMES WITH POWER

1 Thessalonians 1:4-10

Key Verse: 1:5

“because our gospel came to you not simply with words but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and deep conviction. You know how we lived among you for your sake.”

As we learned, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 is Paul’s thanksgiving for the church of the Thessalonians, the elect ones of the Thessalonians. When Paul thanked God in his prayer, he continually remembered before God their work of faith, their labour of love and their endurance of hope in the Lord Jesus Christ. In today’s passage, Paul’s thanksgiving continues. Verse 4 is an interlude before the continuation of his thanks for the Thessalonian church. It says, “For we know, brothers, loved by God, that he has chosen you.” After commending their faith that works, their love that labours, and their hope that endures, Paul had to pause to say the reason for his commendation. That is God’s love and his election: “We know, brothers, loved by God that he has chosen you.” The doctrine of God’s choice is the very thing we have thought of in study of Jude. Jude 1 says, “…to those who have been called, who are loved by God the Father and kept by Jesus Christ.” Here, in 1 Thessalonians chapter 1, Paul writes in his thanksgiving and commendation for the church why he assuredly could say that God had chosen them. It is because of their faith, love and hope in their present condition. Now in today’s passage, Paul further mentions it describing how God worked in them and so he is so sure of their election by God, which is the assurance of their salvation and all the blessings in him.

**First, the gospel coming with power (5).** Paul says in verse 5, “because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction…” Here “our gospel” is the gospel they preached. In addition, it shows that they were so committed to the gospel that Paul was happy to say, “our gospel.” It is also written in 2 Thessalonians 2:14, “He called you to this through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ.” In 1 Thessalonians, the word “gospel” is written 6 times: in 2:2, “…we dared to tell you his gospel…”, in 2:4, “…to be entrusted with the gospel…”, in “…to share with you…the gospel of God…”, in “…we preached the gospel of God to you…”, and in “…in spreading the gospel of Christ…” We know that the gospel is the gospel of God and the gospel of Christ. The gospel was originated from God and the gospel is regarding Christ, God’s Son as written in Romans 1:1-3, “…the gospel of God—the gospel he promised…in the Holy Scriptures regarding his Son.” In today’s passage the word “gospel” was expressed as “the message” or “the Lord’s message.”

The precise contents of the gospel are Christ’s death and resurrection as Paul said in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4, “For what I received I passed on you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised from the dead according to the Scriptures.”

Here in 1:5, Paul says, “…our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” The gospel first comes with words. Romans 10:17 says, “…faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ.” Also, Paul said in 1 Corinthians 5:2, “By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you…” The gospel is to be spoken with words. It does not fall from the sky like rain.

Yet, that is not all. When the Thessalonians heard the gospel Paul preached, the power of God, that is the power of the Holy Spirit, worked in them. And they were deeply convicted. We are reminded what Paul said in 1 Corinthians 2:4-5, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.” Speaking the words of God is different from speaking human words. God’s words are different from men’s words. Those who teach and preach the words of God should themselves accept and believe the words and preach, depending on the Holy Spirit through much prayer so that the Spirit’s power may work. We are reminded of what Jesus said in Acts 1:8, “You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you and you will be my witnesses…” We continually pray that this promise of our Lord Jesus be true to us.

Also, the gospel Paul preached to them came with the power of the Holy Spirit and deep conviction, because of their attitude towards the gospel. Paul said in 1:6, “in spite of severe suffering, you welcomed the message with joy given by the Holy Spirit.” He also said in 2:13, “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.” They were thirsty and hungry for the word of God. One’s attitude toward the word of God matters. When Paul preached the gospel in Pisidian Antioch, the Gentiles had a good attitude toward the word of God, while the Jews rejected it in their pride. Acts 13:48 says, “When the Gentiles heard this, they were glad and honoured he word of the Lord; and all who were appointed for eternal life believed.”

The gospel comes with power, rapidly or steadfastly in one’s heat and life. The gospel believed and planted in the hearts of people changes them in the matter of time. Paul said in Romans 1:16, “…it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes…” The gospel of Jesus Christ who died for our sins and rose again from the dead changes sinners. They receive forgiveness of their sins and live a new life in Christ Jesus. They avoid sin and resist the devil, sensing the reality of the devil’s existence and temptation. They come near to God through hearing the word of God and prayer. They gradually and clearly form the right view of people and the world, based on the gospel. As Paul wrote in Romans 3, there is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who does good, not even one (3:10, 12). All human righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isa 64:6). All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Ro 3:23). Paul thought he was a righteous man, but he was caught by his sin of covetous desire (Ro 7:8). James 2:10 says, “For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilt of breaking all of it.” And God judges according to one’s inner motives, what he seeks (Ro 2:7-8). Sin brings God’s wrath and his righteous judgment, plunging sinners into the eternal punishment. No one can escape God’s wrath and his eternal judgment. Man’s sin was such a serous matter that the Son of God had to die on the cross for the sin of all mankind. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. Without the gospel of Christ, all people would perish and this world is a hopeless world under God’s judgment. When one accepts the gospel and holds to it, his view of life and the world becomes very clear. They have a clear life direction in this world with the hope of the kingdom of God and his glorious coming.

When we are in difficult life situations, we have no place to go but to the cross of Christ who bore all our pain, agony, brokenness and abandonment. The author of Hebrews says in Hebrews 13:12-13, “And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.” Then as Him Song says, “Joy in the place of sorrow, peace in the midst of pain, Jesus will give, Jesus will give; He will uphold and sustain.” When we come to him with our pain, we can gain the cross of Christ Jesus. Thank God for the gospel given to us and working in our hearts and lives. May the gospel of Christ have increasing power in us and through us.

Paul continues in verse 5, “You know how we lived among you for your sake.” The gospel preacher and the life of the preacher cannot be separated. One’s repentance and gospel-centred life is a powerful factor in one’s teaching and preaching the gospel along with the power of the Spirit.

**Second, becoming imitators (6-8).** Verse 6 says, “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.” As we thought of, the gospel changes people’s lives. And it moulds them into imitators of the Lord. Here the word “imitator” is in Greek *mimétés*, which is the root of the English term, mimic. Although Paul was with them in person for such a short time, around just one month, they imitated the life Paul, who had imitated the life of the Lord. This is in accordance with what Jesus said, “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). Those who believe the gospel become the followers of Christ and thus imitators of Christ Jesus the Lord. So Christians can mean little Christs. They imitate the Lord Christ Jesus through their predecessors of faith who also imitate the Lord. In this way the imitation of the Lord continues. Paul said in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ.”

Jesus once said to the unbelieving Jews, who claimed that they were Abraham’s descendants and God was their father, “You belong to your father, the devil, and you want to carry out your father’s desire. He was a murderer from the beginning, not holding to the truth, for there is no truth in him. When he lies, he speaks his native language, for he is a liar and the father of lies.” (Jn 8:44). The children of the devil resemble the devil; the children of God resemble God. In a strict sense there are two kinds of imitators, the imitator of the devil or the imitators of the Lord or God. Paul said in Ephesians 5:1, “Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children.”

Truly human life is a life of imitation. We know that children grow through imitation, good or bad. Whom or what we imitate matters. As we studied in 3 John, Apostle John said in 3 John 11, “Dear friend, do not imitate what is evil but what is good.”

Here Paul says continually, “in spite of severe sufferings, you welcomed the message with the joy given by the Holy Spirit.” How precious the joy of the Holy Spirit is that comes through the message of the gospel of salvation! It transcends human circumstances.

And Paul says in verses 7 and 8, “And so you became a model to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia. The Lord’s message rang out from you not only in Macedonia and Achaia—your faith in God has become known everywhere. Therefore we do not need to say anything about it.” Through the imitation of Paul and of the Lord, they became a model, an example for others to follow, and the Lord’s message was trumpeted out everywhere through them. The church of the Thessalonians, the elect ones of the Thessalonians, were really precious in God’s sight.

**Third, serving the living and true God (9-10).** Then verse 9 says,“for they themselves report what kind of reception you gave us. They tell how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God.” The Thessalonians’ changed lives revealed the contrast between idols and the living God. Idols are dead, but God is living and lives forever. Idols are false, but God is true. Idols are many, but God is one. Idols are visible, but God is invisible. Idols are man-made, but God is the one who made man. In Thessalonica, emperor worship was very strong. In addition, people worshiped Greek and Egyptian gods. The worship of these gods was associated with gross sexual immorality. The Thessalonians were slaves of idols and their carnal desires. However, when they believed the gospel, they were changed. Their turning from such idols to God against their human culture and the trend of the world was truly great. It showed their clear repentance. They were truly blessed to serve the living and true God. To work under a good human boss is a blessing. Then how much more blessing it is to serve the living and true God.

All human beings wander as descendants of Cain until they find and serve the living and true God. The Magi were like that. But when hey found their true object of worship and serving in the baby Jesus, the King of the Jews, the promised Messiah whom God sent, they were truly happy worshiping him with the offering of their treasures, their most precious gifts. The Samaritan woman tried to find her object of love in men, one after another. However, she was not satisfied but only had disappointments and shame until she met her true object of love and worship in Christ Jesus. Having this Jesus as her true husband, her wandering and wounded life ended, and she was endlessly happy to serve the living and true God. God saved us through his Son Jesus Christ so that we might serve him throughout our lives and even in eternity. Luke 1:74, 75 says, “to rescue us from the hand of our enemies, and to enable us to serve him without fear in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.” We can serve him in any human condition. There is no retirement in serving him.

Yet, there are two kinds of believers, those who serve themselves and those who truly serve God. There are many believers who serve themselves and their desires for a better life and accomplish goals and dreams in the world, using the name of God and of Christ. Such a life is not a blessed life, but a sad, miserable one. God wants us to be very clear that we serve God, the living and true God in Christ Jesus. Our studying or working should be in line with this true life-purpose of serving the Lord. We can serve the true and living God through doing the gospel work and serving others in the name of the Lord. If we do not serve the Lord, our life is pointless and meaningless. It is written in the last chapter of Revelation, “The throne of God and of the Lamb will be in the city, and his servants will serve him” (22:3). To serve the living and true God is the purpose of life in eternity.

Also, the hope of the Thessalonians was very clear, “to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead—Jesus, who rescues us from the coming wrath.” They had a blessed life serving the living and true God at the present. They also had a glorious hope of his Son appearing from heaven. The phrase “his Son from heaven” reminds us of what the angel said to the disciples who stood looking intently up into the sky when Jesus was going up, “This same Jesus, who has been taken from you into heaven, will come back in the same way you have seen him go into heaven.” (Ac 1:11). This is the hope of every Christian’s heart. He comes back from heaven to judge the world and at the same to rescue his people from the coming wrath, the eternal wrath, which is the eternal judgment of the fire of hell. No one but Jesus, who died for our sins and whom God raised from the dead, can rescue us from the coming wrath. Serving the living and true God and waiting for his Son from heaven can be is the whole point of Christian life.

We thank and praise God for the gospel preached to us. It has saved us and changed our lives so that we as his chosen people can imitate our Lord Jesus Christ and serve our living and true God, waiting for his Son from heaven. May the gospel of Christ Jesus have increasing power in our lives and may we live as gospel servants in our time.