

1 Thessalonians 1 (5) – The Preaching of God’s Word

Paul is talking to the Thessalonians about the assurance of their salvation. He wants to tell them about how he knew they were saved, which also means how they can know they are saved. And how you can know if you are saved. Assurance comes down to evidence. There are certain identifying marks of a born-again believer. Paul, Silas, and Timothy had seen and heard about this evidence. So, they had been thanking God in their prayers for the Thessalonians because of what had happened and what was happening with them (vs.2-3). They knew that God had saved the Thessalonians.

And Paul knew that assurance starts with God. He wanted to make sure they knew that as well (vs.4). He also wanted them to know what these evidences of God’s work were. And he starts in vs.5 by telling them about his own preaching, and the results of their reception of the word of God.

The Puritan Thomas Watson (1620-1686) said – “God never repents of His electing love.” Hallelujah! If all we ever do is look to our own “performance” or “works” for our assurance, our assurance will always be lacking. We will always fall short of the standard (cf. Romans 3:23). However, our assurance isn’t a matter of perfection, but direction. We learn to love Jesus, we long to follow Jesus, and we see and experience works of faith, labors of love, and a steadfast hope in Jesus (like Paul mentioned in vs.3). Amen.

Our good deeds can’t save us. Our desires don’t save us. Our devotion won’t save us. Only Jesus Christ can save us. And when we wonder and worry if we are saved, our assurance must be found by looking to Jesus, and trusting the promise of God to save those who trust Jesus. Salvation is a matter of grace, and our faith must be in Christ himself, in his sinless life, in his atoning death, and not in our own deeds and desires and devotion.

This doesn’t mean that people can just say a prayer and then forget about God. That’s not the kind of life the Thessalonians were living. That’s not how God works in the redeemed soul. True faith, given by God, produces change.

What you need to understand is that faith produces obedience rather than obedience producing faith. The key to obedience is not willpower, the key is to stoke your faith, fan into flame the gifts God has given you.

If your faith seems to be lacking fruit, then meditate on your union with Christ. Focus on how the Holy Spirit indwells you, how Jesus loves you, and how God's grace has saved you. Enjoy the presence of God by giving him praise. Love stoked faith inspires and empowers you to obey him. And as you realize the fruit of your union with Christ, your personal sense of assurance will grow. Have faith in God. And you will see your faith grow.

The New Testament is full of the truth that God's electing love produces certain marks in the believer (see for example, the book of 1 John). And of course, Paul the Apostle knew this truth. So, Paul wanted to tell them why he knew that they were among God's elect (vs.4). And he wanted to tell them of these identifying marks. So, in vs.3, he had given an outline of God's work in their lives. And now, he was going to give some more detail.

Still, by insisting on God's prerogative in election, Paul was teaching them that works are not the ground of our assurance, they are the evidence of our assurance. And so, their assurance wasn't a case of, "Because you are doing this, God has chosen you." Rather, it was, "You are doing this, because God has chosen you." The difference is important.

because our gospel came to you – Paul is going to speak of what he saw, and what he perceives as a result of what he saw.

our gospel – Sometimes Paul refers to the message he preached as *our gospel* (2 Thessalonians 2:14). Other times, he refers to his message as *the gospel of God* (1 Thessalonians 2:2, 8-9). Calling it *the gospel of God* affirms the authority of the message. It was not made up by men, it came from God. And to reject the message would be to reject the authority of God. And Paul also uses the phrase *the gospel of Christ* (1 Thessalonians 3:2), because it is good news that centers on the person and work of the Messiah.

not only in word – Paul says that the power of the gospel came in more than mere words. But his gospel did come in words. Preaching is an essential element in the saving of sinners. Romans 10:13-14 – *For “everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.” How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching?* Romans 10:17 – *So faith comes from hearing, and hearing through the word of Christ.*

not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction – when Paul says, “more than words,” he means not just words, but words filled with God’s power through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. As the gospel was preached and people were transformed, Paul knew that the power of the Holy Spirit was at work in their lives.

Now, people might look at the words, “power,” and “in the Holy Spirit,” and think that Paul was talking about how works of power attended his preaching. As if he was saying that he performed signs and wonders among them, and this is what caused people to believe. Now he might have done those things, but that isn’t what Paul was talking about.

Some might think that Paul was talking about how powerfully he preached. And there is certainly a sense of that when he says “in the Holy Spirit.” So, some believe that Paul knew that they believed, because people responded excitedly and immediately. But again, that isn’t what Paul was saying here. Paul had preached to them several times over several weeks. And what Paul was saying is that he knew the Thessalonians were saved because of what happened, not just when he preached, and not what happened immediately after he preached, but what continued to happen even after he left Thessalonica. Paul said he knew that they were saved because he knew the Holy Spirit had powerfully worked full conviction with them. And Paul is explaining what that means. And what salvation looks like.

God’s word is transformational. Paul brought God’s word and people were transformed by God’s word and became more like Christ. A true, God

honoring and God empowered sermon is not simply delivering information, and it's not just a matter of inspiration, it's aimed at transformation. When God's word is rightly interpreted and applied, the preaching event is attended by the Spirit of God to do what no mere lecture can do.

You preach the truth, and you challenge people to repent of their own way and believe in the truth. And if there is transformation like what we see here in this passage, then, just like Paul knew, you can know that the Spirit of God has worked in a person's life. In your life. The result of Paul's preaching was evidenced by their lives, as Paul details in this passage. And so, he was able to give them a full assurance, because they had a full conviction, which was demonstrated by the marks of conversion. Their faith was demonstrated by obedience. Their worship was demonstrated by their lives.

God uses preaching to save people's souls. And even after people are saved, God uses preaching to change people's lives.

When people think of good preaching, many are looking for some sort of visible response to the preaching of God's word. We might think that a message was effective if a lot of people come forward after the message. And Paul is indeed talking about a visible response to his preaching by the Thessalonians. People could see what had happened. But he isn't talking about an immediate excitement, and people making public decisions right after he had preached. Now, I'm sure that some of the people had immediate responses. But Paul is talking about how it became obvious that God had used his preaching to save souls, not because of immediate reactions, but because of the ongoing repentance. Paul was talking about how the people had changed, how they were transformed, not about how excited they were in the moment, but how their lives changed direction. Paul was not talking about an immediate decision; he was talking about an ongoing demonstration. This became the proof to Paul of their conversion.

And those evidences that Paul is about to give them were to be an assurance to them of their salvation as well. And the fact that Paul himself lived just

like he says he was seeing in them was evidence to them of the truth of the message. They knew Paul, Silas, and Timothy had been severely afflicted, yet they continued to live out their faith. This obvious witness was why Paul said, *“You know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake.”*

Paul was a witness to the worth of Christ, a living example of how a believer in Jesus should live. They knew Paul was under affliction, but they saw how he stayed the course, he didn't give up, and he still had joy, and strong faith, despite the affliction, and in some sense, because of the affliction. They saw how Paul was, and they went and did likewise (vs.6). That is true discipleship, and it only happens as we reach a full conviction. That means the conviction of the one who is discipling, and the conviction of the one who is being disciplined. And we are all involved in the process of discipling each other. Discipleship is truth transferred through relationship. We learn from all Christians. We only give what we have. We only receive what has been given. And conviction, given by God, makes it all happen.

with full conviction – this is about the conviction of the preachers, as well as the conviction of the hearers, the conviction of the ones who delivered the message, and the conviction of the ones who received the message. True conversion comes through those who have full conviction of the truth of the gospel because they have experienced its life-changing power. Paul knew that God had anointed his preaching with power. He experienced it as he was preaching, and he experienced it when he saw the results of his preaching over the course of time. Paul, Silas, and Timothy were an example to the Thessalonians, and the Thessalonians were an encouragement to Paul, Silas, and Timothy. Paul was convinced of the truth, and he delivered it with conviction, and they received it with conviction.

God is still using the preaching of his word today. That's his promise. God uses preaching to save people's souls. God uses preaching to change people's lives. If you are hearing God speak to you today, then today is the day to be saved, to be changed, to be transformed. Repent to God of your sins, put your faith in Jesus Christ, and enjoy the fruit of God's promise.