

God's Word

*"Thy word is a lamp unto my feet, and a light unto my path."
—Ps. 119:105*

Speakers and Congregation elders!

The subject that I have received for this introduction is interesting and also extremely timely. This subject has already arisen many times in our midst in Finland.

The Finnish church's strong ecumenical efforts toward the church of Rome make the subject timely for us in Finland. One of the objectives in this is to try to undo the doctrinal decrees of the Reformation. In our Christianity we worriedly follow the process that is underway.

Another reason for the timeliness of the subject to us are the doubts concerning the reality of first one biblical event and then another that are repeatedly presented in publications by representatives of the so-called critical Bible study. There are also those in the service of the church who do not, in their own words, believe in the existence of God. These statements shatter people's position on God's Word and God's existence. Such positions always bring their own dangers for believers, especially for the young.

A third factor which makes the issue important is that even in the life of God's children there is a danger that the worth and significance of God's Word decreases in both home and individual life. Everyone of us have reason to ask ourselves, what is the significance of God's Word in my life. Do I have time to devote to the study of God's Word? Is the Word of God the power and joy of my faithlife?

When we have been established in the responsible task of a speaker to bring the Word of God wherever God sees necessary to bring it, it, above all, requires us to have the proper esteem for God's Word. In this task it is also important that we willingly learn and study God's Word.

I have felt myself to be very ignorant while compiling this introduction about one of the central topics of the Bible. In my introduction I will go through some fundamental ideas about God's Word, its power and task in the world. I believe that there is much God-given wisdom and ability here to augment my presentation and to bring to it new perspectives and experiences of God's Word and its significance. In the beginning I will with a few thoughts review God's speech and His message in the Old Testament.

God's Word

What Is God's Word?

The first words that express God's speech are found in the creation narrative. Amid all the darkness and void are heard God's words: Let there be light! And so it happened. When God then created man and placed him in paradise to dwell, He gave man one commandment: Eat freely of every tree in paradise, but eat not of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: for in the day that you eat of it you will surely die (Gen. 2:16, 17). We know the results. Through the enticement of the enemy of souls, Adam and Eve fell into sin and transgressed the word that God had given. We carry the results of the Fall in our flesh and blood.

When people multiplied and sin increased, God had to remind man whom He had created that He is Lord and He is to be loved above all. God exhorted man to press this matter into his heart: "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up" (Deut. 6:4-7).

From the Old Testament we can see that God fed His children with His Word. "And he humbled thee, and suffered thee to hunger, and fed thee with manna, which thou knewest not, neither did thy fathers know; that he might make thee know that man doth not live by bread only, but by every word that proceedeth out of the mouth of the LORD doth man live" (Deut. 8:3).

When the enemy of souls troubled Jesus with the temptation of bread, Jesus rebuffed the temptation with precisely the aforementioned words of the Old Testament. The Old Testament relates that the words of God were so good to Jeremiah that, after he had heard them, he ate them. "Thy word was unto me the joy and rejoicing of mine heart," confirmed Jeremiah, pleased by the Word of God (Jer. 15:16).

The Lord Entrusted His Word to His Son

God has also given His Word to His Son. The Lord spoke of this already to Moses: "I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him" (Deut. 18:18).

Jesus often taught of the close fellowship of the Father and Son in His speeches. Jesus even said, "All things that the Father hath are mine" (John 16:15). Jesus also once said to Philip, "Believest thou not that I am in the Father, and the Father in me? the words that I speak unto you I speak not of myself: but the Father that dwelleth in me, he doeth the works" (John 14:10). Jesus taught that these words which He spoke will never pass away (Matt. 24:35), but rather they endure forever (1 Pet. 1:25). Jesus himself spoke God's Word. Jesus rebuffed the temptations of the enemy of souls with God's Word. But He also taught of himself and God's kingdom,

exhorted people to repent, with parables. When speaking of God's Word Jesus showed that the Spirit gives life to the Word and that His words are spirit and life (John 6:63). The disciples experienced this, especially Peter. When Jesus asked His disciples: Will you also go away? Peter answered, "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God" (John 6:68, 69).

Jesus Gave His Word to His Own—to His Disciples

At the end of His farewell speech, Jesus turned to the Father and asked that the Father would glorify the Son and the Son the Father. In this prayer Jesus prayed on behalf of His own disciples, praying that the Father would protect them from all evil. In this same connection Jesus said that He gave His word to His own disciples: "For I have given unto them the words which thou gavest me; and they have received them, and have known surely that I came out from thee, and they have believed that thou didst send me" (John 17:8). God's children have wished, in accord with the will of their sender, to bring these words that speak of grace and reconciliation for people to hear. Paul teaches of this office of reconciliation, "To wit, that God was in Christ, reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5:19).

The Acts of the Apostles relate how the apostles, even under the persecution of Saul, preached the Word of God (Acts 8:4). The core of that word was the gospel, as Paul [Luke] says of it, "And they, when they had testified and preached the word of the Lord, returned to Jerusalem, and preached the gospel in many villages of the Samaritans" (Acts 8:25). On the same trip Philip received the task of going to Gaza, where the eunuch of the Ethiopian queen was returning from worshipping in Jerusalem. On his trip he read the Bible but did not understand what the portion of the Bible that was before him meant. By the operation of the Holy Spirit, Philip, as the Acts of the Apostles again relate, opened his mouth and began from this writing to preach the gospel of Jesus to him. When the eunuch believed upon Jesus, Philip baptized him (Acts 8:26–38). New birth occurred "not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, by the word of God, which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Pet. 1:23).

Faith Comes By Hearing

Paul writes to the Romans about how man receives faith: "So then faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God" (Rom. 10:17). A preacher is needed for this, a preacher who has been sent for this task. "And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?" (Rom. 10:14, 15).

When an unbelieving person is in the hearing of God's Word, God through the Holy Spirit awakens faith in the listener's heart. Man sees that here is God's kingdom and its king, Jesus Christ, is present with His own in His Word. In the word of the gospel is offered a grace that can be owned: You can believe all your sins, above all unbelief, forgiven in Jesus name and blood. Faith conceived by the Holy Spirit obtains complete grace for itself. Peace, joy, and love descend upon the heart. New birth has occurred. Man begins to follow the Lord and us, as Paul says of

this matter to the Thessalonians: “And ye became followers of us, and of the Lord, having received the word in much affliction, with joy of the Holy Ghost” (1 Thess. 1:6).

God's Word Is Holy

When Peter gives various directions for the endeavor of God's children, he says of speaking, “If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God” (1 Pet. 4:11) This means that it is important to stick to the teachings of God's Word in a sermon as well as in teaching.

The Bible teaches us to also speak that which belongs to sound doctrine (Tit. 2:1). Love, however, is the gift of heaven with which we should approach people, so that the word could speak and affect. Paul even confirms, “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1).

Listening to the Word is important for everyone, also for speakers: “He that hath ears to hear, let him hear,” taught Jesus in His time (Matt. 11:15). But Jesus also had to confirm that not all wished to hear: “For this people's heart is waxed gross, and their ears are dull of hearing But blessed are your eyes, for they see: and your ears, for they hear” (Matt.13:15, 16).

The Law and the Gospel

Paul teaches that God's Word is living and powerful. It is also sharper than any two-edged sword (Heb. 4:12). In Christianity one edge is often seen to mean grace and the other the law. The task of the law is to drive those in the night of unbelief and the works of darkness to Christ, to grace. There, again, the law is not heard, for grace begins to teach and instruct man to reject the works of darkness. The law is often compared to the light of the moon because the moon obtains its light from the sun. Likewise even the sermon of the law comes from God's kingdom, from hearts enlightened by the brightness of Christ, to lead those outside into the light.

A child of God, too, has an inclination, especially when he has fallen in a fault, to take a place under the law. In the place of grace comes hardness and condemnation. Surely, we remember the case of David and how he was ready to proclaim the death sentence upon another when he himself had fallen in great sins.

God Opens the Door of His Word

As speakers we have experienced a speaker's temptations, fears, even successes in the task of a servant of the Word. Sometimes the same text has felt easier to preach on, and at other times it's like pulling a stoneboat. Sometimes, when the word does not seem to have opened, some listener may have come to us and as it were to ask, How did God know to give the brother those words which brought comfort for precisely my sorrows.

Some kind of rehashing is probably familiar after one's own sermon, to some more, to others less. It's needless, but what can a poor fellow possibly do for himself. We can childlike believe that God knows the needs of the listeners as well as speakers and grants the door of His Word to open according to these needs. Here is a question of our honor.

Of course, the trials and difficulties of life and the sorrows of one's own heart bring their own pressures to speaking. The most important thing is that the horn has a correct, healthy sound. Sin, an uncared for conscience, lead a speaker into unhealthy teaching. While preparing for our turn of service we have the privilege to ask the Heavenly Father for a blessing and the right words of grace for our speech. It is comforting to remember that if in our speech we are foolish, we are foolish to the Lord.

God's Word Has Its Day of Visitation

God in His love draws man to repentance. He has the gospel preached where people have a need to hear and receive it. It, also, is God's work that an interest in God's Word awakens in man.

In mission work we have been able to experience and see that God has awakened a hunger for the Word even among atheists and many have received the grace of repentance. It has also been seen here in America as well as in Finland that many places, where during the early awakenings God's fires burned and there were many believers, are now a wilderness that has burned to ashes. The candlestick has been moved elsewhere.

There is reason to remember that God's voice can be silent. Herod received no answer from Jesus, although he had long wanted to see and hear Him. Sometimes we have ourselves been able to experience, when we have visited with someone who has suffered shipwreck in faith, that the revelations of God's Word end. Neither his sin nor the condition of his heart have opened to the person in question.

In this connection there is reason to especially mention that living Christianity does not teach man to dig at consciences, but rather leave them to the spoken word of God and the instructions of grace.

In the Bible there are many examples of how the Holy Spirit has led the work of the gospel and how the gospel work has succeeded. But in the Bible there are also found examples of how the Holy Spirit has forbid the proclamation of God's Word. The Acts of the Apostles relate that when Paul traveled with Timothy through the province of Galatia, among other places, the Holy Spirit forbid them from speaking the Word of God (Acts 16:6). It was said to Jeremiah, in spite of his youth, "Thou shalt go to all that I shall send thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak" (Jer. 1:7). Thus only to the place where the Lord sends.

As a Listener Under Grace

It is always a great moment when one can be listening to God's Word. It is also a very important matter for a speaker; his own soul can live of the gospel. The Word of God proclaimed with many gifts broadens understanding and gives new perspectives. Above all it refreshes and feeds children weary in the temptations of daily life. In a sermon God nourishes with grace and wisdom (1 Tim. 4:6). According to Isaiah, the Word of God has an effect, as he says, "It shall not return unto me void"(Isa. 55:11).

Even as experienced listeners of the Word we are not critiques, but we, preferably, encourage especially young speaker brothers in their task. If we with the ears and eyes of a faultfinder listen to sermons, there is a great danger of swelling into an all knowing and understanding speaker and in the end one's own faithlife dries up.

As listeners of the Word, we should pray that the Lord would open His Word and that we would receive in our hearts the portion of heaven's bread which God sees necessary to give us. It certainly would not do any harm if we would even discuss the teachings of a sermon at home. If as hearers of the word we notice something that is doctrinally wrong concerning matters of justification and endeavor in a speaker's sermon, we advise our brother of this. Let us not, even then, forget to lift and encourage.

When we listen with a correct mind, we can experience what the travelers on the way to Emmaus experienced: "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:32).

We Are to Read and Examine God's Word

The Epistle to Timothy tells how Paul valued Timothy's knowledge of the Bible. He said, "And that from a child thou hast known the holy scriptures, which are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Christ Jesus" (2 Tim. 3:15). In the next verse Paul also shows that the writings of Scripture are necessary: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness" (2 Tim. 3:16).

The Acts of the Apostles tell of the believers of Berea, who had gladly received the word: "and [they] searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so" (Acts 17:11).

Peter shows in his epistle how the prophets have sought and inquired of salvation and also prophesied of the coming grace (1 Pet. 1:10, 11). These instructions given to Timothy are appropriate advice for us all: "Be thou an example of the believers, in word.... (in conversation, in charity, in spirit, in faith, in purity. Till I come,) give attendance to reading, to exhortation, to doctrine" (1 Tim. 4:12, 13).

The Bible says that Apollos was an eloquent man...and mighty in the Scriptures (Acts 18:24).

Preach the Word

It is not always easy to go to preach God's Word. There can be many reasons. One's own poorness burdens. The work has no visible results. The audience is not always favorable. Text temptations are familiar. It has surely always been so.

Jonah is a good example for us of how difficult the work of preaching the gospel sometimes is. Jonah was given a text and a place where he was to preach, but he fled from the task. Jonah softened in God's school and went to preach in Nineveh. After the sermon,

temptations came again and Jonah complained to God. Again a lesson on God's grace and mercy was needed. "And should not I spare Nineveh, that great city, wherein are more than sixscore thousand persons?" (Jon. 4:11).

Paul's instruction to the preacher of God's Word is clear: "Preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine" (2 Tim. 4:2). It is good to remember that no prophesy occurs of the will of man, rather men of God have spoken and speak inspired by the Holy Spirit (2 Pet. 1:21)

In the Beginning Was the Word

At the end of my introduction, I want to stop at this Word which we proclaim, speak, and teach. John writes, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.... All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made" (John 1:1). In the Epistle to the Hebrews we may read of how God has spoken to the fathers through the prophets and in the last days through His Son, through whom the world has been made. A little later the author of the Epistle to the Hebrews confirms that He carries all with the power of His Word. The entire world, life and everything that takes place, depends on it (Heb. 1:1, 3). But just like the world's beginning and preservation has occurred and occurs by the Word of God, likewise this world's end. Peter writes in his epistle, "But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men" (2 Pet. 3:5-7).

Once this Word will be taken away and thus the foundation of this world will shatter. When the last chosen one enters the house of God this world is not needed. Ahead is judgment and the resurrection of the righteous. Then it will be good to stand before the Judge, when the judge is familiar and an advocate who says: Lord, here are the children which you gave me.

Let us watch, dear brothers, in faith keeping faith in a conscience cared for by God's Word. Let us speak the sweet words of grace to the oppressed, those troubled by sin. Now there is still a time of work, a day of visitation. Truly God's fields turn white and mature for the day of harvest. There is better ahead. We remain to believe all sins forgiven in Jesus name and blood. We can hold even this meeting with a secure and joyful mind.

Discussion Questions

1. When we speak, let us speak the words of God.
2. Why is it also important for speaker brothers to listen to sermons?
3. What does the fact that God's Word is holy mean to a speaker?
4. The difficulties and temptations of the speaker's task.
5. How should we approach the unbelieving in sermons and discussion?
6. What does it mean that a speaker also lives of the gospel?
7. How can we encourage you servants of the Word and laborers?
8. What should the whole/comprehensive sermon of the gospel contain?
9. What has the Word of God given me?
10. How do I teach the Word of God to children and young?