

The Word Prevails

Acts 19:1–20

February 10, 2002

“The word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.” How wonderful it is! The word of God does not stand still. The word of God does not lie dormant. The word of God does not dissipate or vanish. It grows. It grows because it is alive. It grows because it is vital. It grows and increases and spreads because it is of God. Moreover, not only does the word of God grow, but also it prevails mightily. It thunders upon many waters; it flashes forth flames of fire; it shakes the wilderness (Psalm 29:3, 7, 8). The word of God conquers the enemy. The word of God saves the lost. The word of God befriends the friendless. It rescues the wandering. It converts the misdirected. The word that goes forth from his mouth does not return to God empty, but accomplishes that which he purposes, and prospers in the thing for which he sent it (Isaiah 55:11). And today, the word of God comes to us.

“The word of the Lord grew and prevailed mightily.” That was true for Paul. It was true before Paul. And it continues to be true for us today here at Grace Covenant, throughout Richmond, and beyond. For this word of God, this growing and mightily prevailing word of the Lord, is none other than the gospel of Jesus Christ. “It is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek” (Romans 1:16), to the people of Israel then and now also to us who live on the other side of the world twenty centuries later. The word of God is the power of God, and the shape, the form, the reality of that power is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of our sin, the call to repentance, the renewing of our lives, and the promise of life eternal.

Have you been growing and prevailing lately? Are you on top of the world? Do you have everything under control? If so, do you have the resources to continue that growing and prevailing today and tomorrow? Or have you been getting beaten down lately? Are you being diminished? Is life being taken away from you? The word of God is the power of God, and the shape, the form, the reality of that power is the gospel of Jesus Christ, the forgiveness of our sin, the call to repentance, the renewing of our lives, and the promise of life eternal. There is something here for everyone. Some of you here, and some of you listening on the radio, have never before heard the good news, and it is fresh and exciting for you. Others of you here, and others listening on the radio, have heard it and received it and believed in it and rejoiced in it for decades, and it is still all the more welcomed, loved, and cherished today. For it never grows old. And we never outgrow our need for it.

We are all standing in the need of forgiveness, and even if we have known of our forgiveness for lo these many years, it is still good to remember God’s mercies fresh every morning. We are all standing in the need of repentance, that ever more fully turning away from self and toward God, that turning which admits of genuine progress but which is never complete or perfect in this life, so that we continue in it until the day we die. We are all standing in the need of renewal in our lives, a renewed heart, a renewed soul, a renewed mind, and renewed strength, that we may ever more fully love God and love neighbor. We are all standing in the need of eternal life, given now as a promise in the midst of this passing and fleeting life, given then in truth and reality in the world yet to come, when the word of God shall prevail mightily

over the power of death. We are all standing in need of what the gospel of Jesus Christ is and in need of what the gospel of Jesus Christ gives.

Every one of us is at a different point in the Christian life, from those who at this moment are only potentially Christian to those who by now have known and loved the Lord for nearly one-hundred years. And yet, the same gospel is for us all. The same Lord is over us all, "one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:6). And it is his power at work within us, in and through his word, in and through the gospel of Jesus Christ, to reclaim us as his very own. So it is that the word of God grows and prevails mightily.

Some people in Paul's day did not understand. Some people today still do not understand. The word of God is not for sale. The word of God is not for profit. The word of God is not for profanation. The word of God is not magic. It is powerful, but it is free from our control. It is healing, but it will not be manipulated. It is gospel, unlike any other power in the world. It lives. It grows. It works within the hearts, souls, minds, and strength of those to whom God addresses it and in whom God awakens a response. And so the word of God prevails mightily.

Another way of saying this is to say, "To Christ belongs the victory!" Jesus Christ wins the victory over all his enemies and over all our enemies. Now, he does this in a very strange way. The only one of us who never sinned allowed all the sin of the world to be counted against him, and he paid the price for it. The one who is the source of all life allowed death to do its worst to him, and it killed him. The one who knew no evil allowed all evil to attack him, and he did not resist its assaults. And yet, it was in this way alone that evil was undone. Evil lives by creating a response in kind, and when it found no response, no reaction, no revenge in Jesus Christ, no striking back, evil withered and died. And God vindicated Christ's willing sacrifice by raising him from death to new life, conquering death for ever, depriving it of the advantage of fear, initiating the great harvest of the resurrection, and promising to us eternal life. Thus was the wonderful exchange started and completed. Christ took on our sin that we might take on his righteousness. He took on our evil that we might benefit from his faithfulness. He took on our death that we might receive his life.

This is the victory of Christ. This is the gospel of Christ. And this is the power of the word of God. No wonder it grows and prevails! People need it. People want it. People thrive on it. Is it of interest to you? Does it resonate with your heart? Does it speak to the silences of your soul? Does it enlighten the mysteries of the world? Does it humble your heart? Does it strengthen your will? If so, you are in the right place. If not, why not? Do you not acknowledge the reality of sin? Do you not hear the call of the gospel? Do you not believe in the truth and reality of the resurrection? If not, you, also, are in the right place. For in this place, the gospel will be read, preached, and heard, for those who believe and for those who do not believe, that those who do not believe may believe, and that those who do believe may believe more. This is how the word of God grows. This is how the word of God prevails.

We live in times that seem strange to us, though I suspect that other times would seem even stranger to us. We conquer some diseases, only to find others, or to have the first thrown back at us as weapons. We have received a nation founded for the freedom of religion, only to have it now want to exercise that in freedom from religion. We live in a society which wants to tolerate everything, except the desire to establish and maintain those very standards which are necessary for the survival of human society. What are we to do? How are we to be the church in today's world?

The church lives by hearing the word of God and by sharing the word of God. We gather here to do the first. We go out into the world to do the second. Every one of us is here today because someone brought us here or invited us here. Some of you children and young people are here because your parents brought you here. I would suggest that you thank them for doing that. Their bringing you here is even more important than their feeding you. Providing for you to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, the living word of God, is the most important responsibility any parent bears, and the most wonderful gift they can give you. Some of you adults are here today because your parents brought you as children. You now know for yourselves the reality and the significance of the kind of gratitude I was describing to the children.

Some of us are here because someone invited us to be here. The congregation invited and called me to be here, and I am grateful for that. Some of you were invited by other families or individuals, and you have long since professed or reaffirmed your faith in Jesus Christ and joined this congregation of his church. Some of you are here today because members or even visitors invited you, or you saw an ad in the paper, or you saw the building when you were going by, or maybe even someone far away from here pointed you in our direction.

We are grateful for all of this, because this is how the word of God grows and prevails. This is what the spread of the gospel of Jesus Christ is all about. This is what we are to be about as the church of Jesus Christ. We want to be going out into the world, inviting and bringing people here to hear the word of God, to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ, to receive the forgiveness of sin and the promise of eternal life, to be called to repentance and renewal, to be led into deeds of mercy and compassion, and so to be sent back out into the world to start all over again, inviting and bringing people here to hear the word of God. Can you help us do that?

Hear again the words of King David:

“Ascribe to the LORD, O heavenly beings,
 ascribe to the LORD glory and strength.
 Ascribe to the LORD the glory of his name;
 worship the LORD in holy array. . . .
 The LORD sits enthroned over the flood;
 the LORD sits enthroned as king for ever.
 May the LORD give strength to his people!
 May the LORD bless his people with peace!” (Psalm 29:1–2, 10–11)

We have added our voices to those of the heavenly beings in worshiping God. And now the Lord does bless us with peace, with the peace of the gospel of Jesus Christ, with the word of power which grows among us and which prevails over all its enemies.

How wonderful it is! The word of God does not stand still. The word of God does not lie dormant. The word of God does not dissipate or vanish. It grows. It grows because it is alive. It grows because it is vital. It grows and increases and spreads because it is of God. Moreover, not only does the word of God grow, but also it prevails mightily. It thunders upon many waters; it flashes forth flames of fire; it shakes the wilderness (Psalm 29:3, 7, 8). The word of God conquers the enemy. The word of God saves the lost. The word of God befriends the friendless. It rescues the wandering. It converts the misdirected. The word that goes forth from his mouth does not return to God empty, but accomplishes that which he purposes, and prospers in the thing for

which he sent it (Isaiah 55:11). And today, the word of God comes to us. May it grow here and prevail mightily among us!

*To God Almighty, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,
be all praise, honor, and glory
now and forever! Amen.*

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