

## *To God Alone Be The Glory*

When tragedy happens, someone is usually there with a camera, shooting video footage of the aftermath, if not the actual event. Does it ever feel a bit intrusive as the cameras record what should be private moments of grief? There is no pleasure in watching people mourn, when hope has fled the scene.

How should we react to tragic news of sudden death? Shall we say, “Well, everybody has to die sometime”? Do we comfort ourselves with: “At least they didn’t suffer much”? When tragedy takes a younger person, do our minds sift through the many experiences the deceased won’t have, how many accomplishments won’t be attained in life?

Early death brings more than just earthly consequences. Ponder the eternal welfare of those who die. Everyone will spend eternity somewhere. Maybe you’ve seen a clip of someone who is mourning the sudden loss of a relative with a smile on their face. They say to the camera, “We know her soul is in heaven. She’s with her Savior Jesus.” Makes you want to jump up and praise God for such testimony. The person might as well have said, “Dear listeners out there on the other end of this camera, there’s something more important than this earthly life. We are on this earth for only a short while. Death can come at any time. I know some of you don’t like hearing it, but you can’t change the facts by ignoring them. God gives life, and he maintains his right to end life whenever it is

best. Since we know this, we don’t have to be unprepared for death. In fact, the main purpose for our life is to have time to repent of all our sins and believe in Jesus as our Savior.”

There’s a term for this, you know. Our life is our time of grace. Hebrews 9:27 says, “*People are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment.*” When you couple this verse with the comforting words of Jesus to the thief on the cross (Luke 23:43), “*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise,*” you can see why Christians conclude that this life is our one chance. There isn’t a second chance. Now is our time of grace. Now is the day of salvation. “*Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near*” (Isaiah 55:6).

So what can we do to make sure that on our death-day Jesus says to us also, “*I tell you the truth, today you will be with me in paradise*”? Today’s Scripture lessons urge us to listen attentively to God’s faith-sustaining Word as if to say: “**JUST WATCH WHAT GOD’S POWERFUL, EFFECTIVE WORD DOES.**”

“Wait. God’s message is powerful?” Yes. The Lord says so through his prophet Jeremiah (23:29). “*Is not my word like fire, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?*” What’s the hardest rock of all to break? Did you say ‘diamond’? Ok, but the human heart can be harder still. Your heart may not seem so hard now that God has brought you to faith in Jesus and you’re connecting with God’s Word. But surely you know

someone whose heart refuses to soften for God, even after hearing God's Word many times. What a warning! Even after the Holy Spirit brings us to faith, we can get stubborn about certain sins, defending our right to do them rather than repent of them. The Lord once said about us humans that *every inclination of the thoughts of our heart is only evil all the time* (Genesis 6:5). Whew! That's quite an indictment of our naturally hard hearts! And yet somehow God's Word overcame the inborn hostility that our sinful flesh feels toward God (Romans 8:7). What a miracle it is that anyone believes in Jesus as Savior! What a miracle it is that you are even here in God's house today, or tuning in to watch! Do you see how powerful God's Word is? It not only converted us from spiritual death to new life in Christ, it got us out of bed this morning for worship! Or it got us to shut off all the other distractions at home so we could focus on the worship video. That's power! So we understand what the Apostle Paul meant when he wrote, "*I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes*" (Romans 1:16). See WHAT GOD'S POWERFUL, EFFECTIVE WORD DOES?

I hope the skeptical part of you is thinking about today's Gospel. During the Parable of the Sower and the Seed did you notice that in three of the four places where the seed was sown, the ground did not produce a crop? Then how can we say God's Word is powerful and effective? In our country, on any given Sunday pre-

COVID, fewer than 15% of the population was gathering around God's Word where the seed could be scattered onto their hearts. How many church members typically open their Bible or a devotion book to feed their faith daily? Perhaps 5%. If God's Word is powerful enough to burn like fire and smash rocks like a hammer, why aren't more people producing abundant fruits of faith? Why are so many of us giving in to the temptation to be nasty to others, to talk down to others, or to snap back at others when they are nasty? It's like Satan is spreading around something worse than a virus—COVID brain.

But God's Word is still powerful. Look more closely at how God exerts the power of his Word. It's different from how the world does power. The world would take a jack-hammer to the hard path, and the rocky ground, and the nasty weeds, and **pound** them all to smithereens. That's the kind of power the world respects. But the Holy Spirit exercises his almighty power with gentleness. Through the law he lovingly breaks down the excuses people throw up to explain why it was ok to talk mean to others. If we don't listen, he sends some sort of pain to get our attention back onto his Word, maybe a stubbed toe, maybe an infectious virus. When the Word of God is persistently laid on our hearts, it's as if the Holy Spirit is dragging a rake through a thick tangle of weeds, thinning them back. Soon he's out there on his knees, humming a tune while he clears away the rocks from the rocky ground of our heart. And when the big clods of clay have been reduced to dirt,

then the Holy Spirit brings the soothing gospel, and he coaxes us: *“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost... Listen, listen to me and your soul will delight in the richest of fare... hear me, that your soul may live”* (Isaiah 55:1-3). And that’s when you see the gentle power of God’s Word at its strongest. The seed is sown in your heart, and little by little the plant grows. Soon there’s a batch of new seeds forming on it. God’s Word is so effective in you that now you often do things for the Lord without realizing it, just because you love him. In time you become known as a person who is joyful or peace-making, while still being firm, patient, kind-hearted, good, faithful, gentle, self-controlled (Galatians 5:22). You didn’t used to be as much like that. But the Holy Spirit has been working in you through God’s powerful and effective Word. Those of you who have added reading God’s Word to your daily routine can attest to what God says in today’s Old Testament lesson: *10As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, 11so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.*

So then the question to ask is: What does the Holy Spirit want us to do with God’s powerful and effective Word? First,

let’s use it. One of the things that has made my labor among you so pleasant is how many of you are reading your Bible at home or listening to it in your vehicle. I’ve seen the repentance that Holy Spirit is working in you through your regular reading. But we haven’t yet arrived at 100% of us reading the Bible at least six days a week. So I’m going to keep on urging and encouraging and reminding and prompting and suggesting that you hunger and thirst for God’s Word daily. It will produce kind thoughts, loving behaviors, and peace in Jesus. I want this for you.

A man in Kansas City was severely injured in an explosion. His face was badly disfigured. He lost his eyesight and both hands. He had just become a new Christian, and one of his greatest disappointments was that he could no longer read the Bible. Then he heard about a lady in England who read Braille with her lips. Hoping to do the same, he sent for some books of the Bible in Braille. Much to his dismay, however, he discovered that the nerve endings in his lips had been destroyed by the explosion. One day, as he brought one of the Braille pages to his lips, his tongue happened to touch a few of the raised characters and he could feel them. Like a flash he thought, “I can read the Bible using my tongue.” When the story about him was published a while back, the man had tongued through the entire Bible four times. God’s Word must be awfully effective if it would prompt this

man to do such a thing. Since we have eyes, let's use them to feed our faith. Of course, it's not how many times you have been through the Bible, but how thoroughly the Bible has been through you. As the saying goes, "A Bible that is falling apart usually belongs to someone who isn't." Since God's Word is effective, let's use it.

And since God's Word is powerful, let's trust it. But wait. If God's Word is powerful, why does it take so long for churches to get anything done? Businesses seem to accomplish things faster. People will get up and go to work every day, but notice how few were coming to worship every week before COVID-19. And imagine how many people are still skipping church even though they can stream the worship videos anytime of the week! Yet God's Word is powerful enough to turn this around. At one time every member of this church was so close to God that they promised to attend worship faithfully and regularly. Imagine if they keep their promise when things return to normal. Next year if just 90% of our members come to church every week, we will have to have three services in order to serve everyone. You have the power to push us into more services. God's Word has the power to change us. Let's trust it.

Sometimes pastors erroneously think, "What these people need is a little haranguing," so the pastors use God's law only to beat up on the flock without

then binding up the wounds and soothing and forgiving their repentant hearts with God's gospel. It doesn't happen as often anymore in this age of tolerance, but occasionally someone will still suggest, "Pastor, I think you ought to preach a strong sermon on such-n-such a topic. Our congregation needs a swift kick in the pants." But this would just show how impatient we are for God's Word to work. No, let's trust God's powerful Word to work according to God's timetable. We won't excuse the sin of despising God's Word. It's just as wrong as any other sin and way more dangerous. On the other hand, consider how God's Word could be abused if it worked like magic. All you'd have to do is know which passage to speak at the right time, and people would automatically do whatever you wanted, like robots under your control. But God's Word isn't like that.

Instead the Holy Spirit works through it, usually slowly, to change God's people into servants who are eager to do what is good (Titus 2:14). This eagerness overcomes the natural laxness of our sinful flesh. This is why you so often find yourself wanting to do what is right. There is the power of God's Word: it makes God's people eager to do what is good. | Good Lord, work powerfully and effectively in us through your Word. We want to grow up in our salvation, now that we have tasted that you are good (1 Peter 2:2-3).