

Hearing God's Word Together

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Date: 07 January 2024

Preacher: James Ross

[0 : 0 0] and taught great numbers of people. The disciples were called Christians first at Antioch. Okay, so for the next three Sundays, we're going to think about some of the privileges that we share together, the privilege of praying together, the privilege of being the people of God and enjoying fellowship together. And this evening, we're going to think about hearing God's Word together, and especially to think about preaching. But as we do that, I wonder if you can relate to any of the following. During a sermon such as this, on an evening such as this, do you ever, it's not intended to be a guilt trip, do you ever find yourself glazing over that struggle to stay awake, perhaps daydreaming? Do you ever find yourself planning for the week ahead? Your brain begins to turn over your mental to-do lists. Do you ever wish the preacher was more fill in your own blank? Do you ever find that you forget what was spoken about even before you've got out of the door? I imagine I am not alone in being able to recognize all of those in myself. I don't get to fall asleep as often as I used to, because I'm up here, but I'm sure we all probably struggle sometimes.

Why does it happen? There's probably many reasons. Sometimes it's because of our circumstances. Busy weeks, busy lives, we come tired. Maybe this is the one time we sit down, we've got nice comfy seats now. It could be a challenge. Perhaps it's because we're not used to simply sitting and listening for an extended period of time. It doesn't feel like anything else that we typically find ourselves doing. It seems very ordinary. Faith comes by hearing. By God's design, preaching matters, but it can be hard work to listen, regardless of who is doing the preaching. I want to suggest one more reason why perhaps sometimes we struggle with sermons and preaching. I think it's because sometimes we can easily forget what's happening, because it all seems so very ordinary at one level that we forget that actually what's taking place right now is extraordinary.

And we need to think about that. The second Helvetic confession, sometime in the 16th century, has this statement, the preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God.

The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God. So what's happening as we gather in this setting is that God is speaking, Jesus is speaking to His church through a preacher.

[3 : 3 0] The preacher. The preacher as instrument becomes a herald, the voice of the King, representing nothing less than the authority of Jesus. That in itself reminds us this is a big deal.

It's like a really awe-inspiring thing for a preacher to recognize that as well. So as we begin thinking about these privileges that we have as a church, one of them is the privilege of preaching. Because by God's design, He would speak to us in a particular way as His Word is proclaimed. And to help us to think through this, we're going to follow the progress of the church in Antioch. And we're going to see God's Word at work in this young church. And then hopefully, as we've laid the groundwork and we come to appreciate together, okay, preaching matters.

Maybe we remind ourselves preaching matters. We'll think about some practical suggestions for how we can then make the most of the privilege of God's Word of God's gospel being preached. That maybe we'll be able to focus and appreciate what's happening a little bit more. The first thing that I want us to recognize, and we see it here in Antioch, is that the Word, God's Word, creates the church.

Okay, so we visit Antioch in our minds for a few moments. It's a really interesting city back in the first century. In some senses, quite similar to Edinburgh, a similar population, about 500,000. Obviously, it was a very different setting. It's kind of central western Turkey, a really important city, the third big city in the Roman Empire. And it was known for being really diverse because it was a popular trading spot. So, there was large Jewish population there, but also a very large Indian population. There was a large settlement from Persia, even folks from China. There were all these trade routes, and then people began to settle in Antioch. So, it was really diverse. And what we

read about in verses 19 and 20 is of the gospel coming to this city, called Antioch, in Turkey, and we see the spread of the gospel. We see it geographically, don't we? Because it's moving from Phoenicia, from Cyprus to Antioch. But we also see it spreading culturally. Because here are some, and this is interesting as well, here are some unnamed evangelists who break through the great barrier of the first century, that Jew-Gentile divide, to share the good news with those from a Greek background, declaring the good news about the Lord Jesus. And the result is here. At first, we discover in verse 21, the Lord's hand was with them.

[6 : 59] What that's telling us is that God worked through His messengers. God's Word is working, but working as His people are speaking God's Word. He's working through the Word of the gospel as it's declared. And the other result that we discover is a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. There's the gift of faith and repentance. They're believing, they're turning, probably turning away from idols to the true and the living God. And the church in Antioch is created as God's Word is proclaimed. This is what God does by His Spirit. He uses His Word to build His church. That's always the primary way the primary way the Holy Spirit works. As God's people either preach or share the good news of who Jesus is and what He's come to do, the Spirit takes that Word, applies it to hearts, brings new birth, and there are believers for Him. And we see the really dramatic impact in a city like Antioch, very different culture from the Jewish culture, many gods, many temples, many idols, but they're turning to the true and the living God. God's Word is being proclaimed. The Spirit is working in power. Jesus is speaking through His people. Sinners are being saved, and God is being glorified.

Preaching and proclaiming is no small thing. We're being reminded God chooses to do His work through His Word as it is preached. Sometimes God works to speak judgment, sometimes to justify, sometimes to convert, sometimes to conform and to make people more like Jesus. But He's always working as His Word is being preached. We can see so clearly that God is powerfully present as the gospel is proclaimed, and that word of the gospel which is about Jesus creates the church. Think for a moment about what they proclaimed. Look at verse 20 again. They were telling the good news about the Lord Jesus, that Jesus is Lord. I like to imagine them this week.

I'm sort of thinking about these believers. They've come out of a situation where they've seen Stephen being martyred, and the church has been scattered, and they come to this new city. I like to imagine them sort of walking around the streets, and they're watching, and they're learning, and they're speaking.

Perhaps using the idea of, you know, this good news phrase, good news, that was familiar to Roman citizens. When an emperor won a great battle, and there was many battles in the first century, this proclamation of good news would spread. Your emperor has won a victory. Or if one of the Caesars had a son, the proclamation of good news would spread around the empire, there's a successor on the throne.

[10 : 32] Well, you imagine these Christians taking this idea, oh, I heard the emperor had good news. Can I share with you even better news, the good news of King Jesus? His victory over darkness and evil by way of the cross and the empty tomb. Can I speak to you of a king who brings forgiveness and peace?

To speak of the coming of God's Son as truly good news for everyone who would trust in him. You imagine these Christians walking around a pagan city. See those sacrifices that you are making to try and earn the favor of the gods. Let me tell you about the sacrifice that Jesus, the Son of God, made so that you could enjoy God's favor. You don't need to earn it. You need to freely receive it by trusting in him. And when you do, you can know God's love and favor in your life.

Imagine them walking around, walking past temple after temple, after pagan shrine and pagan shrine. I see your places of worship. Do you know that Jesus, when he walked this earth, he said that he was the true temple. If you want to meet God, you don't need to come here. You need to know Jesus.

And he didn't just come to be the temple. He also came as the great high priest. And that in his death, the way of access to God is now open. The price has been paid. The no entry sign has been torn down. Or to recognize just how courageous their faith was.

As they spoke to people in Antioch, you say, Caesar is your Lord. Let me introduce you to Jesus, the true Lord, the true King, the Son of God. Imagine the courage and boldness. As they bore testimony to Jesus' wonderful life, as they spoke of his teaching and his miracles. As they could point out the difference between King Jesus and the Caesars. If you've ever read anything in history

about the Caesars, you know that they held on to power and they would be ruthless with anyone that opposed them.

[13:05] And it was all about them having a stranglehold and amassing great things for themselves. Jesus is not like that. Jesus left the throne of heaven. Jesus sacrificed himself for his people. This is a king unlike any other. Not least because he rose again. And he is Lord and he is king forever.

It's really interesting to read church history, the first centuries of the Christian missionary movement. You have men, you have women sharing their faith wherever they went. Washing clothes together, buying in the market. Can I tell you about Jesus? He's really good news. The Word of God as it is proclaimed, as it is preached, creates the church. We see the principle here in Antioch. We see it all over the book of Acts. And the same is true today. It's interesting that Luke doesn't record the names of the folks who first crossed that barrier and shared the gospel with those from a Greek culture. Perhaps it's to remind us that the point isn't the person speaking. The point is that God speaks through his people. It's our God who is special. Our God who is love, who invites us to experience the love of Father, Son, and Spirit as his Word is proclaimed. It's our Savior Jesus who's special.

He is God's gift of love to us and he comes to meet with us in his Word. The Word of God is what creates the church. Before we leave that point, wouldn't that be a great theme for our prayers? A great theme for our engine room prayers, to remember, to pray that God's Word would be at work, creating new believers here in Becloot, down in Galashios, as Hope Church Leith begins soon enough. We think about the church in Scotland. We think about the church in the places that we come from, to ask that God would continue to work through his Word to make believers of men and women and boys and girls. So, the Word of God creates the church.

Second thing to notice here is that the Word of God is grace for the church. Now, I think it's fair to say that we live in an era where nothing seems quite so exciting as the presence of celebrity. You notice that any major occasion, if you watch on the television, they're always looking to find, where's the celebrity in the crowd? We've even seen the excitement of the world of darts. I don't know who's been following, discovered this. Luke the Newt Littler, little 16-year-old made the darts final. There's celebrities and there's football clubs crowding to be associated with him. We love the idea of celebrity. Think about this, though.

As we gather here, every time the church gathers, every time God's Word is preached, God himself is here.

[16:55] Jesus comes to speak to us, to minister grace to us. What would that do to our expectations as we come to church week by week? If we remembered, King Jesus wants to speak to me as his Word is proclaimed. The next stage in the church's life in Antioch, we find in verses 22 to 24. News of this, a number of people believing and turning to the Lord from a Greek background reached the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch. Wonderful choice. Sending a delegation to see what's happening. Now, we meet Barnabas, the son of encouragement. How does Barnabas feel? As he sees what's going on, what did he find? When he arrived and saw what the grace of

God had done, he was glad. That's what he finds. He finds that God's grace has been powerfully at work. Lives have been transformed. New believers have been made. An international church has been established.

And how did he feel about it? He was glad. He gave him joy as he recognized God is pleased to bless the nations through the preaching of his Word. What did he do? He encouraged them all to remain true to the Lord with all their hearts. Keep persevering. Keep going in your loyalty to Jesus as Lord, perhaps recognizing that things would be hard for them. We thought this morning about counting the cost as a follower of Jesus. Certainly hard in the first century. But grace continues to be poured out.

We discover by the end of verse 24, a great number of people were brought to the Lord. Were they brought by Barnabas? In a sense, yes. But ultimately, no. It's the Lord who brings his people to himself.

It is the Lord who is adding to his church as the word of the gospel is proclaimed. And all of that is grace. Michael Horton, a systematic theologian, says it this way, through his Word, God is truly present in the world. And isn't that what we're seeing here? The Word about Jesus is being spoken. Grace of God God is being extended and people are being changed. And it's a pattern that's

highlighted by Luke as he records the early days and months of the church in the first century. So, if you have a Bible, just to see this pattern, Acts chapter 4, verse 4. This is what happens after Peter is healed, a beggar. He's used that as an opportunity to give glory to Jesus, announcing him as the promised

[20 : 23] Messiah. Chapter 4, verse 4. Many who heard the message believed. So, the number of men who believed grew to about 5,000. Chapter 6 and verse 7. As the early church, recognizing the struggle to make sure that widows were being looked after, that widows were being looked after as they established deacons, so that the apostles can commit themselves to the ministry of prayer and the ministry of the Word.

Chapter 6, verse 7. So, the Word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly.

Chapter 10, verse 4. Chapter 10, verse 44. Peter is brought to the home of Cornelius, a Gentile, and he begins to preach the gospel. Chapter 10, verse 44. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. Chapter 12 and verse 24. You have this really deliberate putting together of this chap, Herod, failing to give glory to God, and he dies in verse 23.

And chapter 12, verse 24. But the Word of God continued to spread and flourish. It's absolutely clear. So, we see that God's Word preached is a means of God's grace coming to us.

And it's important for us to understand, not only do we have the privilege of hearing God's truth, which is a wonderful thing, not only do we hear the Word of the gospel, which is a life-giving thing, but we enjoy in a real way communion with Christ Jesus as His Word is proclaimed. He comes to speak to us, to speak to us with saving power. He comes to speak to capture our hearts, to remind us that He is better.

[22 : 46] He comes to feed and satisfy our hungry souls. And so, we pray, speak, O Lord, as we come to You.

that just as Jesus, when He was being tempted, said, man doesn't live on bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God, we want to live by this bread to be fed and to be satisfied. The Word is grace for the church. One more thing to notice is that the Word grows and matures the church, as they are in verse 25 and 26. So, another thing that Antioch was known for, maybe this is where you can think about this, maybe it's a bit more like Glasgow than Edinburgh, Antioch was known for its wit, it liked its jokes and its comedy. And one of the things that Antioch liked to do was to give nicknames. So, they would speak about the, I can't remember, we're never going to be able to say it now. The Herodianoi, Herod's people. They got a nickname. The Chaisorianoi, Caesar's people. And now, they're speaking about the Christianoi, Christ's people.

Believers become known in Antioch as Christ's people. And doesn't that tell us something really special about how God is working through His Word in their lives? There is clearly something about these new believers that they can't stop speaking about Jesus. And they're determined to live for Jesus. And the city is taking notice. How did they get like that? Well, look at the next stage of what happens. Barnabas is wonderful, son of encouragement. He's so humble. Verse 25, then Barnabas went to Tarsus to look for Saul. He's not going to make it all about himself.

He wants Saul to come. And when he found him, he brought him to Antioch. So, for a whole year, Barnabas and Saul met with the church and taught great numbers of people.

[25 : 07] The disciples were called Christians, first at Antioch. So, Barnabas and Saul engage in this year-long teaching ministry all about Christ. And the result, they become known as Christ's people.

They're growing in faith and maturity as they're being taught God's Word, as they're digging into God's Word. They're being made more like Jesus through the Word.

I like the way Lewis Allen captures it. He says this, The Christian life begins in hearing the Word of God, in the power of the Spirit, and responding to Jesus Christ in repentance and faith. Christian maturity is an ongoing, ongoing experience of the same. The Word is vital to coming to salvation. The Word is vital to growing up in our salvation. As we see Christ in His Word, and we worship Him, gladly giving our hearts to His Lordship. So, as the Word is preached, the Spirit is doing His work. That lifelong process of shaping us to be more like Jesus, to be more like Jesus, so that we might be Christ's people in our homes, in our families, in our jobs, in our schools and universities, in our day-to-day interactions.

The Word grows and matures the church. Let's change gears for a moment.

Since this is true, that God's Word creates the church, it's grace to us, and it causes growth, how can we make the most of preaching? Paul wrote to the Corinthian church, the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it's the power of God. Christ crucified is the power of God and the wisdom of God.

[27 : 34] power and wisdom in the message of the gospel. As we understand that as the Word is preached, Jesus is proclaimed and Jesus preaches. The gospel is proclaimed and God works in the gospel to powerfully save and shape us because God Himself is present. That's our privilege.

As we gather to hear God's Word read and preached week by week, Sunday by Sunday. We'll finish with four Ps to help us perhaps to make the most of it. How can we make the most of preaching? I think we need to begin with prayer. It's really important that God's people are praying for those who preach. Because as we recognize what a huge deal it is, it's really important that we pray for whoever is preaching. That they would have the appropriate time in God's Word and understanding of it and the ability to communicate as God would want them to as best as we can. It's really important to pray for our own hearts. To be on guard against sin that would create a barrier so we don't hear, we don't want to hear the gospel preached. To pray that we'd have hearts that are ready to receive. That we'd be praying before we come to church and also to pray after. So that the Word wouldn't just disappear. Perhaps we'd pray it through as God would bring it to our minds. So we pray. The second P is that we pay attention. And this is hard. Of course it's hard. Sometimes it's almost impossible. But as much as is possible, as we recognize the privilege of hearing Jesus speak to us, we want to pay attention to what is being said. What does active listening look like?

[29 : 53] It varies from person to person, doesn't it? For some of us, we find taking notes is a really helpful way to pay attention to then to be able to go back and recall and read over. Perhaps it's helpful for some to jot down particular points of application or something that particularly strikes us. Yeah, I need to think more about that. I think it can be really helpful for our attention to have our Bibles open, to be looking up those other references. It's all part of being engaged.

I saw somebody's advice this week and I liked it. It said, resolve to be a yes face. So one of the things I have here is that I get to see everybody. And we all have different faces for how we receive God's Word. But I like that idea of being a yes face. I'll leave you to figure out what that lady was intending when she said, resolve to be a yes face. But it's good to be engaged, isn't it? Because we know that God is speaking. If we're going to make the most of God's Word, it's important that we give time to ponder, to meditate on it, to talk about it with others, over the dinner table, in conversation. Maybe one of the advantages of taking notes is that you can then return to the text, return to those thoughts, to think about how we can encourage others with what's been read and preached. And of course, if we're to make the most of preaching, we want to look to see how can I put it into practice, to allow God's Word to be that mirror that exposes and shows us where God would have us to change in response to His Word, to think about the main points of a text, and to think about how it applies to our lives so that we'd be hearers and doers.

Because we have a wonderful privilege of hearing God speak to us in His Word, of hearing the Lord Jesus in the Word of the Gospel. So let's pray that this year we would enjoy it, our church would enjoy it, those not yet part of our church would come to share that privilege with us.

Let's pray together.