

## That the Word of the Lord May Run

Jeremiah 36:20–31; 2 Thessalonians 3:1–5

The word *run* has two senses: it can refer to the running of a footrace, or it can refer to the running of a machine. We can say, “The runner ran a mile” or we can say, “The car is running.”

But what do we say when the runner is neither a human nor a machine?

In our text this morning Paul asks prayer—literally—“that the word of the Lord may *run*”—that’s the literal translation of the original Greek. Bible translators struggle with how to express this. The New King James has: “that the word of the Lord may run *swiftly*”—adding “swiftly” in italics to help the reader understand the meaning. The old King James has: “that the word of the Lord may have *free* course,” envisioning a runner in a race, running around a course. The ESV has “that the word of the Lord may *speed ahead*,” eliciting the image of a runner mustering all his energy and exertion and pulling away from the pack.

But the original has simply, “that the word of the Lord may *run*.” The Spirit of God inspired those words to get us to think about the meaning. How does the Word “run”?

While you think about that let me point out that I have three points this morning: The church prays: (1) that the Lord would raise up proclaimers of his Word; (2) that the Lord would establish his people through the proclamation of his Word; and (3) that the Lord would help us respond properly to the proclamation of his Word. First,

### **1. The church prays that the Lord would raise up proclaimers of his Word.**

Here is Paul, writing to the church in Thessalonica. Paul had planted this church personally. He had done the public preaching, taught the home Bible classes and focused on training the officers. He had ordained the ruling and teaching elders and organized the church government as set up by Christ. But in the providence of God he was run out of town and had to leave the running of the church to the elders.

As he tells them in his first letter, he and his fellow-laborers, though they could not be with them personally, were “affectionately longing” for the Thessalonian Christians.<sup>1</sup> For them, it was *not* “out of sight, out of mind”! Their longing for them was real. They wanted the church plant to succeed, and they gave evidence of that by upholding them in prayer.

Now, the missionary team seeks to impress on these new Christians how much they in turn need the church’s prayers on their behalf: “Brethren, pray for us.” How this terse and pithy expression must have rung in the hearts of the Thessalonians! How it should ring in our hearts as well!

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Thess. 2:8

The bottom line: church leaders need the peoples' prayers! If the great apostle Paul—a gifted theologian and church planter—needed the church's prayers, then how much more do we! "Brethren, pray for us!" Yes! "Brethren, *pray* for us!"

What shall we pray for?

Paul answers that question: "Finally, brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run . . . and be glorified."

I omitted the italicized word "swiftly," as it seems unnecessary to the meaning. "Run," in this context is reminiscent of Isaiah's inspired words: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the *feet* of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!" (Isa. 52:7).

Here, the prophet speaks of "feet" that bring the gospel. These are *human* feet, of the kind that are used in a footrace.

I remember running in track and cross-country in high school. I wasn't a great athlete and very seldom won anything, but it was good exercise.

The emphasis in the Isaiah text is not on the *speed* of the runner, but rather on his *persistence* in finding willing hearers for his message. In Bible times there were no phones—no radio, no internet, no podcasts, no Zoom, no teleconferencing.

But God speaks about the beautiful "feet" of the proclaimer of his Word—feet attached to a body made of flesh and blood.

God didn't just send his message down from heaven through some kind of loudspeaker system. The second Person of the Holy Trinity had to take on human flesh. He had to become incarnate and become a flesh-and-blood man. He had to take on our nature and become like us in every way, yet without sin. The Word that the Father sent from heaven was the flesh-and-blood, incarnate Word—the Son of God—who chose disciples and poured his life into them, who walked and talked with them. This was all absolutely needful.

"That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, *which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled*, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you" (1 John 1:1–3).

There is a lesson for us here. God intended that his gospel be shared *face-to-face*—by a preacher looking his audience in the eye; by a ruling elder personally leading a home Bible study; by older women teaching younger women; by ordinary men, women and children who love the Lord, sharing Christ with their family, friends and acquaintances, remembering always that the goal is to make disciples, to lead people to Jesus.

This work is best done *face-to-face*, looking people in the eye. With the eye we can judge a person's sincerity. With the eye we can evaluate a person's character. Those who *share* Christ ought to *live* Christ. "For me to live is Christ" (Phil. 1:21). It is easy to hide in a basement and broadcast to the world.

Here comes a person claiming to represent Christ. He shares the gospel message: You are a sinner, you have broken his holy law. Because of your sin you are estranged from God. What you need, more than anything else, is fellowship with God. But he cannot allow you into his holy presence while you are in your sins. He is of purer eyes than to behold evil. You are guilty before him. You need the filth of your sins to be washed away. The only thing that can do that is the precious blood of Christ, shed on the cross of Calvary almost 2,000 years ago. But the good news is that if you believe his word, if you look to God in faith, through Christ the Son, he will forgive your sin and cleanse you from all unrighteousness. He will give you a heart to know him and delight in him. You will become a lover of God. You will become his willing worshipper. You will sing his praises, because the joy of the Lord fills your heart.

Now, if you hear that message, but the person telling it shows no evidence of a changed life—if he does not live a godly lifestyle, if he doesn't have the joy of the Lord, if he doesn't give evidence that the gospel story that he tells has impacted his own life, if he can't look you in the eyeballs and show a genuine concern and care for you—then you're probably not going to listen to him. You would likely conclude: *this man isn't giving any evidence that his life has been changed by the good news he is telling*. You would conclude that there was a great disconnect between the man's message and his life. You would conclude that he is a fraud. Worse, you might conclude that the *Christ* of whom he spoke was a fraud! You would probably want nothing to do with the gospel.

How tragic! The message of Christ was meant to be *lived* as well as *told*. When the apostle writes, "brethren, pray for us, that the word of the Lord may run," he is calling for the church to pray that the Lord would raise up *proclaimers* of his Word. In the first sense, these proclaimers of the Word are the evangelists, pastors and teachers sent out by the church. These are men who feel an inward call to gospel ministry. These are men who, upon testing, are determined to have the godly character and sound doctrine requisite of a minister of the Word. These are men who are called by the church, whose life and ministry are accountable to the courts of the church. Such men preach and teach in the formal, Lord's-day worship services of the church. Or they are foreign missionaries, sent by the church to preach where there is no organized church. These are the formal proclaimers of the Word.

But there are also proclaimers in the informal sense as well—men and women who have a heart for Christ and his gospel, who want to be witnesses for Christ in

the place where God has put them. Such was the demon-possessed man from Gadara, who was in a most miserable state: night and day, he was in the mountains and in the tombs, crying out and cutting himself with stones. Jesus said to him, “Come out of the man, thou unclean spirit.” When asked, “What is your name?” the man answered, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” When Jesus healed him, the unclean spirits went out and entered the swine (there were about two thousand of them); and the herd ran violently down the steep place into the sea, and drowned in the sea. After Jesus healed him, the townspeople found him seated, and clothed, and in his right mind. His life was totally transformed!

When Jesus got into a boat to leave, the man that had been healed wanted to go with him. But Jesus said *no*. Rather, he said, “Go home to your friends, and tell them what great things the Lord has done for you, and how He has had compassion on you.”<sup>2</sup> The man went out and began to proclaim in Decapolis everything that Jesus had done for him.

Here was a man—*not* ordained, holding no special office in the church, whose life had been transformed by Christ—going all around telling everybody about Christ. His was not *formal* but *informal* proclamation.

On the authority of Christ, all of us who know him have his permission to tell our friends and neighbors how the Lord has changed our life.

Let us pray that the Lord would raise up proclaimers of his Word, and let us do that ourselves among our friends and neighbors, as God gives us opportunity.

Second,

## **2. The church prays that the Lord would *establish his people* through the proclamation of his Word.**

Those who proclaim the Word in the formal Lord’s-day worship—that is, the church’s pastors and elders—have a greater responsibility to teach the Word with accuracy and precision, as well as to live obedient lives that reflect the message preached. Paul requests prayer “that the word of the Lord may run . . . and be *glorified*.” “Run” means, in this context, that the message of the gospel might be taken personally, by Christ’s ordained messengers, to every place on earth. “Be glorified,” in this text, means *to be lived out by God’s people in a way that reveals God’s wisdom, majesty and splendor*. As noted by Calvin, “holiness of life and uprightness on the part of Christians is the *glory* of the gospel.” Jesus said, “Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and *glorify* your Father which is in heaven” (Matt. 5:16).

When the church gathers each Lord’s day, it gathers to meet *with* the Father, *through* the Son, *in the power of* the Holy Spirit. The purpose of our gathering is to worship him—to sing his praises, to hear the gospel, and to hear Jesus, as it were,

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<sup>2</sup> Mark 5:19

get up to preach. The church's worship is Word-centered. It is through the Word that the people of God are sanctified. "Being born again, not of corruptible seed, but of incorruptible, *by the word of God*, which liveth and abideth for ever" (1 Pet. 1:23).

The people of God are not established through motivational speakers and human wisdom. They are established through the anointed proclamation of God's word. It is through the "foolishness of preaching" that God saves those who believe. And it is through the proclamation of the Word that the Lord establishes his people in the faith. How tragic that churches get off the track and substitute other things. As pointed out by Jonathan Cruse, some churches turn to mysticism. Sermons are cut for time and watered down theologically. Services are packed with rites and ceremonies, "smells and bells" and religious drama. Other churches turn to entertainment. Preaching is considered too boring. Gospel-centered sermons give way to gimmicks. The lights go down, the screen flashes some sleek graphics. It all begins to look a bit like a TED talk. Preaching becomes performing.<sup>3</sup>

It might seem old-fashioned in our day, but the Lord of the church commissioned his ministers to "preach the Word." To conclude that modern Americans' short attention spans demand something else than what Christ instituted is to assert that the church is wiser than God. "Preach the Word" is the church's marching orders, and that is what faithful churches will do. It is by the proclamation of the Word that the lost are converted, and it is by the proclamation of the Word that God's people are established in the faith. Here in our text the apostle asks prayer that God's people might "be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men," might be established and guarded from the evil one (Satan), and that the saints might live obedient lives ("that you do and will do the things we command you"), and that our hearts might be directed into the love of God and patience of Christ. Would that the people's prayers might bear this kind of fruit in our own congregation! Is this what you yourself want to see in your own life? Don't settle for anything less! May God grant us all to bear gospel-fruit!

The church prays: (1) that the Lord would raise up proclaimers of his Word; (2) that the Lord would establish his people through the proclamation of his Word. Thirdly,

### **3. The church prays that the Lord would help us *respond properly* to the proclamation of his Word**

Faithful churches demand the proclamation of God's word, week by week. Faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ. But proclamation is not enough. Many hear the preaching audibly with their ears but do not respond in faith.

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<sup>3</sup> Jonathan Cruse, *What Happens When We Worship*, p. 114

The incident described in our Old Testament text took place at a time when the word of the LORD had been long neglected. Jeremiah was instructed to write down on a scroll the words that God had given him. He sent his assistant, Baruch, to the temple to read the scroll in the worshippers' hearing. It is very telling that our text does not refer to these words as purely the words and thoughts of Jeremiah. It was stated that Baruch read from the book "the words of the LORD in the LORD's house" (Jer. 36:8). These were not the words of man but the words of *God*—indeed a special treasure! Word reached the king, Jehoiakim, the son of the eminent Josiah, perhaps the most faithful of all Israel's kings. Jehoiakim had been raised in a godly home. He had seen first-hand the way the Lord had blessed his father's wise leadership. His father had tried to rid the land of idolatry. But now his son sits on the throne. His servants hear what was happening in the temple. They summon Baruch and ask him where he had gotten the words that he was reading. Baruch testified that the prophet had "proclaimed with his mouth all these words to me, and I wrote them with ink in the book." Here was the inspired, written Word of God. But when three or four columns were read before the king, what did he do? Did he confess his sins and beg God for mercy? Did he show respect for the Word of God? He did not. Instead, when three or four columns had been read, Jehoiakim cut them out of the scroll with a penknife and cast them into the fire, until the whole scroll was burned up. The king's faithful servants implored him not to burn the scroll; but he refused to listen. Here was an act of sacrilege—gross irreverence toward the God of heaven—but the king did not acknowledge his wrongdoing or beg the Lord to forgive him. He remained impenitent and died and went to hell.

Now I highly doubt that any of us have ever torn out the pages of our Bibles, page by page, and cast them into the fire with disgust, but it is indeed possible that many of us have failed to respond properly to the word of God when it has been preached. Instead of listening intently to the sermon, we allow ourselves to be distracted. Whatever it is that we are thinking about, we are treating it as if it is more important than God's word. The Bible has a name for this; it is called despising the word of God.

How should we receive God's word? Our Shorter Catechism summarizes it tersely: we should "receive it with faith and love, lay it up in our hearts, and practice it in our lives."<sup>4</sup> This is what God requires, and if we are doing anything less, it is a sin to be repented of. It is as if we had been ushered into the holy presence of the exalted Christ, and instead of listening carefully we constantly interrupted and started blurting out our own thoughts. This is the sin of contumacy—stubborn resistance to the authority of the living God, willful contempt of court,

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<sup>4</sup> SC 90, <https://opc.org/sc.html>

as it were. To do that in a human court might put you in jail. But to do it before the court of heaven, and refuse to repent, will land you in hellfire.

It is possible that some of you, listening to this sermon this morning, have allowed yourselves to become distracted, preferring your own thoughts over God's word of truth. If so, then cry to him for mercy. If you humble yourself before him, you will find pardon.

To sum up, the church prays: (1) that the Lord would raise up proclaimers of his Word; (2) that the Lord would *establish his people* through the proclamation of his Word; and (3) that the Lord would help us *respond properly* to the proclamation of his Word. Amen.