

How to Know When God is at Work

1 Thessalonians 1:5

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Take your Bibles and open to 1 Thessalonians 1:5. We are studying the book of 1 Thessalonians and we have come to verse 5 which say, "Because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction."

How do you know when God is at work? How do you know when He is working on someone? What are the proofs and evidences that God is drawing someone to Himself or that God has saved someone? Well verse 5 begins that answer for us.

This verse begins with a link word such as "because" or "for" depending on which translation you have. God's Word does this a lot. It will link what has just been said to what is about to be said. In this case verse 4 is connected with verse 5. Verse 4 says, "For we know, brothers, loved by God, that He has chosen you." How does Paul, Timothy, and Silas know that God has chosen them and saved them? He answers that beginning in verse 5, "because our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction." He says, "One of the reasons I'm so convinced of your salvation is because of the way the message of Jesus Christ came to you and how it impacted you. God was at work when the gospel came to you." There was clear evidence that something divine and supernatural was happening to the Thessalonians as they received the gospel. This is also true today, there will be clear evidence that something supernatural is happening to the person as they receive the gospel.

Now what “gospel” are we talking about? In 1 Corinthians 15:1 we see a description and summary of the gospel, “Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. (2) By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. (3) For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, (4) that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures.” The gospel refers to the victory over sin the Lord’s death, burial, and resurrection brought to you and me. The word “gospel” means good news. It is the goods news of eternal salvation in Jesus Christ.

From verse 5 we see several aspects of the gospel that we need to consider as we answer the question how do we know when God is at work. So let me give you several things about the gospel you need to know.

1. It is a personal gospel: “our gospel”

Number one, it is a personal gospel. Notice verse 5 says, “Because our gospel came to you...”¹ He says “our gospel.” The good news about Jesus Christ is intensely personal to Paul. He doesn’t mean that it is his private possession, that he created it, or that it is about him. He simply means that it was this gospel that God used to change His life. It was this gospel that he had been entrusted with to guard (1 Thess. 2:4). It was this gospel that he had been given the responsibility to share. This is the message that Paul had committed his life too. This good news about Jesus Christ belonged to him and he belonged to it. It was a personal gospel.² So he says, “our gospel.”

¹ The phrase “our gospel” is also used in 2 Cor. 4:3 and 2 Thess. 2:14.

² As Paul continues to write this letter he tells them in **1 Thessalonians 2:2** how he dared to tell them the “gospel in spite of strong opposition.” In **2:4** he reminds them he has been “entrusted with the gospel.” In **2:8** he describes it as “the gospel of God” reminding them from where it came. Then in **3:2** he calls it “the gospel of Christ” reminding them of who it is about. Then in **2 Thessalonians 1:8** he describes it as “the gospel of our Lord Jesus” and warns them what will happen to those who do not obey it. Then in **2 Thessalonians 2:14** describes the calling power there is in the gospel. It was a personal gospel that Paul took seriously. It was a message that changed His life and it was a message that he would do anything to deliver.

When did it become so personal to Paul? According to Acts 9 it became personal to him on a road while he was going to Damascus. That is when Paul was born again. That's when the gospel became personal to him. That is when the gospel of Christ became his gospel. When he says, "our gospel," he means that he, Timothy, and Silas have all experienced the impact from this divine message about Jesus.

When did it become personal to you? When did the gospel of Christ become your gospel? Is it your good news? This is not good news you tell that does not involve you. The story you are telling about Jesus has had an impact on you. The gospel of Jesus Christ has change you. It is your gospel to tell. It is your gospel to protect. It is your gospel to share with others. The very fact that it is a personal gospel is the reason you share it and get excited about it!

2. It is a progressive gospel: "came to you"

Number two, it is a progressive gospel. It is a message on the move. Look at 1 Thessalonians 1:5 again, "Because our gospel came to you..." I am reminded that the Master's message has a mission. The gospel is coming to people everywhere. It has always been on the move and it will always be on the move until the Lord returns.

Jesus said in Matthew 28:19, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations." The gospel is on the move. Jesus later said in Acts 1:8, "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." The gospel is on the move.

Over the years the gospel of Jesus Christ has come to people.

- It came to me when I was 13 at Victory Baptist Church in El Dorado, Arkansas.
- It came to my wife when she was 5 years old in Kampala, Uganda.
- The gospel came to Bryan Martin when he was 7 years old in Macon, Georgia.
- It came to Jeff Hatcher when he was 13 years old in Healdton, Oklahoma.
- It came to Steve Worstell when he was 10 years old in Kansas City, Missouri.
- It came to Lisa Lowell when she was 9 years old in Enterprise, Mississippi.

It has come to you today. The gospel is on the move.

3. It is a presented gospel: “not simply with words”

Number three, it is a presented gospel. Notice 1 Thessalonians 1:5 again, “Our gospel came to you not simply with words,....” Even though this sounds negative and appears to de-emphasize the words we use in telling people about Jesus, it in fact does the opposite. The gospel message came in “words”, it could not come without words, there is no interpreting of Scripture, no preaching of the gospel, nor hearing of it without words. There is no hint here that Paul is disregarding the spoken word. This is not saying, don’t care about how you present the gospel.

It is through “words” that people are told about Jesus. Words matter. Words are important. They are the essential building blocks of sentences by which we are able to effectively communicate with one another. And the gospel has a specific content. It deals with facts. It deals with truth. It deals with information. That is why it must be articulated and verbalized. The implication is, in all our evangelism, whether upfront or behind the scenes, we need to take the trouble with our choice of words.

We need words to communicate the gospel. Today, many Christians never get down to the message. They live the life, but they do not speak the words of the gospel. Romans 10:14 says, “How then shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher?.... (17) So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ.” If we are going to get serious about spreading the gospel effectively, we must first give people content to believe. We must set forth the gospel in clear terms. The only way to do this is with “words.”

It doesn’t matter if you use the bridge illustration, the four spiritual laws, the wordless book, Romans Road, or something else. What matters is you telling the gospel. You can speak it, you can write it, text it, Facebook it or you can use sign language. But the bottom line is, you will have to use words. Acts of kindness may open a door, but it does not tell them about Jesus.

But sadly, there are those for whom the gospel is “simply words.”

What is it like to hear the gospel “simply with words”? There are at least three types of hearers who listen to the Word of God that hear it simply as words without the power, the Holy Spirit, and deep conviction that should follow (1 Thess. 1:4). Let me describe them to you.

- **First, there is the casual hearer.** This person listens, but does not pay attention. This person may attend church every Sunday. They may sit in the same seat each week. They hear message after message. Truth after truth. Insight after insight. They are one of the faithful attenders, yet for them the message is “simply with words.” No power, no depth, no change. No interest. No concern. However, when church is over you feel as if you have done your religious duty. If someone were to ask you what the message was really about, you would have a hard time explaining because most of the time you were not tuned in, you were tuned out.
- **Then you have the intellectual hearer.** This group is listening. They hear the definition of words. They hear the information about the background information to the sermon. They understand what the message is saying in theory and if they are intellectually challenged they are pleased with the sermon. If they perceive they did not learn anything new then it was not a good or deep sermon. They listen with the mind only. This person will not experience any real change. For them the gospel message and the sermon was an intellectual exercise, but for them it was still only a message that was “simply with words.”
- **Finally, you have the emotional hearer.** This group will hear God’s Word maybe even cry and are disturbed to hear about the sin in their life. They may be moved to the point that they say to themselves, “I am going to change. I’m going to quite. I’m going to start living right.” But the message only comes to them “simply with words” that move them emotionally. On the other hand, they may enjoy the message. The preacher may be funny and tell interesting stories and the listener feels good about what he hears, but it brings no real change to the heart of the person. The message has only come “simply with words.”

I want you to know that I love you. As your pastor, I want the very best for you. I want you to receive all that God has for you from our time together this morning. I want you to succeed. I want you to experience the abundant life Jesus talks about, so I want you to take what I'm about to say with love. Some of you are professional sermon hearers. You listen to sermon after sermon. You carry with you a sermon-meter, which you measure each sermon based on how intellectually stimulating it was, how entertaining it was, or how it made you feel. With it you evaluate the style and manner of how the sermon was delivered. It bothers you if the preacher does not use the right grammar or the right wording. You notice the mistakes he makes and take note of how he could improve. Then you compare and contrast him with another preacher thinking how much Preacher A is better than Preacher B. You are a professional sermon hearer. The message comes to you "simply with words." However, you don't want to be that way. You want to be different. You want the Word of God to impact and empower your life.

With that in mind, I want you to notice the gospel came to them in words, but it was "not simply with words" in regards to how it was received. It was received as a divine message. In 1 Thessalonians 2:13, Paul thanks God for how they received the gospel. He says, "When you received the word of God, which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men, but as it actually is, the word of God...." This brings us to the next three observations.

4. It is a powerful gospel: "but also with power"

Number four, it is a powerful gospel. Notice 1 Thessalonians 1:5 which says, "Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power...." Let me tell you what this does not mean.

- **"With power" does not mean that the gospel was preached in a powerful way.** Even though Paul thought through his words carefully and prayed over what he would say. When he preached he used all the skills he had in communicating the gospel of Jesus Christ. He may have had great speaking abilities and maybe not. He may have used great illustrations, then again maybe not. It may have been the best prepared message of all time, then again it may have not. The point is: the power of the gospel is not in the messenger, but in the message. This is why

a lost person who knows the facts about Jesus can share how to be saved and someone becomes born again. It helps if the messenger is a clean vessel and saved and sensitive to the Holy Spirit, but the reality is the power of the gospel is the truth of it, not in the one who delivers it.

- **“With power” does not mean that the gospel was preached with powerful miracles.**³ Even though Paul was used by God to perform miracles and many miracles did follow Paul’s preaching ministry. This is not what it is talking about.

So what kind of power accompanied the gospel?

- **“With power” refers to the innate power of the message.** The message was divinely energized with authority, influence, muscle, and ability to bring about change on the inside of a person, to bring about change on a spiritual level. There is supernatural power built into the message itself.

It could have come “simply with words,” but instead it came “with power.” God wants us to see that the gospel is more than careful clarification of its facts. The word “power” refers to the ability to do something, to bring about change. This is what Paul was talking about in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes.” The gospel has the power to move a person from being dead in their sin to being alive in God, it has the power to move them from unforgiven to forgiven, blind to seeing, lost to found, headed to hell to headed to heaven, from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light.

Paul refers to this again in 1 Corinthians 2:4 where he says, “My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words, but with a demonstration of the Spirit’s power, (5) so that your faith might not rest on men’s wisdom, but on God’s power.” His preaching was accompanied with change brought about by the Holy Spirit and change that was accomplished by God when they placed their faith in God’s Word.

³ Some would like to relate this to miraculous works as authenticating signs, but normally, the plural, “powers,” would be used if that were meant (see Matt. 13:54; 14:2; 1 Cor. 12:10; Gal. 3:5; Heb. 2:4; 6:5).

When they heard the message and mixed their faith with it, a change took place in the way they thought, behaved, and felt. Their *mind* began to be renewed, their *behavior* began to align up with their new way of thinking, and their *emotions* adjusted to the truth they had received. There was a change that took place and that is the power that is being mentioned here. 1 Corinthians 4:20 says, “For the kingdom of God is not a matter of talk but of power.” The kingdom of God and its message is about changing people for the glory of God.

5. It is a supernatural gospel: “with the Holy Spirit”

Number five, it is a supernatural gospel. 1 Thessalonians 1:5 says, “Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit....”⁴ Behind the power was God himself. This is supernatural power. God takes your *natural* words and combines it with the *super* power of the Holy Spirit to produce something *supernatural* when you speak the gospel of Jesus Christ to people.

Notice we are told in a very general sense that the gospel came “with the Holy Spirit.” Basically Paul is saying, “We know that you are saved and chosen by God because we saw the work of the Holy Spirit operating in your life from when you were saved until now.”

When the gospel is accompanied “with the Holy Spirit” what are some things you can expect?

- **“With the Holy Spirit” you find conviction.** John 16:8 says, “When He [the Holy Spirit] comes, He will convict the world about sin, righteousness, and judgment.” The key word here is “convict.” One of the ministries of the Holy Spirit is that of conviction. When the Bible speaks of *convicting* someone of something, it is referring to *convincing* them of something. So the Holy Spirit’s job is to convince lost people of their sin, their need of the righteousness of God, and the

⁴ Notice the position of the “the Holy Spirit,” between “power” and “full conviction.” He is the source of both the power gospel and the conviction it brings.

judgment to come. Paul was convinced the Thessalonians were saved because he saw the work of the Holy Spirit convincing them the gospel was true.⁵

- **“With the Holy Spirit” you find illumination.** This is the ministry of the Holy Spirit that enables the Christian to understand and apply God’s truth in his or her life. In His role as the Illuminator, the Holy Spirit helps us to understand God’s Word so that we are able to grasp, experience, and apply God’s Word to our lives. 1 Corinthians 2:14 says, “The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned.” It is the Spirit of God that helps believers spiritually discern things. Jesus put it this way, “The Counselor, the Holy Spirit – the Father will send Him in My name – will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have told you” (John 14:26). When it came to the Thessalonians, Paul was able to see the Holy Spirit illuminating truths that they could only understand by the help of the Holy Spirit. The gospel came with the Holy Spirit’s work of illumination.

“With the Holy Spirit” you find guidance into righteousness. You find the fruit of the Holy Spirit (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control). Paul is saying when the gospel came to you and you received it and became born again I saw how convicted you were of your sin.⁶ I saw how the Word of God was illuminated to your heart and mind. I saw the fruit of the Holy Spirit coming from your life and that’s why I can say, “For [I] know, brothers loved by God, that He has chosen you” (4). The gospel came with power and with the Holy Spirit.

⁵ The Spirit’s power to call, convict, enlighten, transform, assure, and comfort far more effectively than mere words alone distinguishes the coming of the gospel from the arrival of eloquent speeches.

⁶ Paul did not rely on his excellent hermeneutics, his knowledge of homiletics, his first-class education, his mastery of the original languages, his natural eloquence, or his powerful personality. It was not his outlines, his illustrations, or his sincerity that produced such spectacular results as always followed in the train of his preaching. It was the Holy Spirit. From start to finish, everything about Christianity is supernatural. No wonder we have to rely on the Spirit of God.

6. It is a penetrating gospel: “and with deep conviction”

Number six, it is a penetrating gospel. 1 Thessalonians 1:5 says, “Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the Holy Spirit and with deep conviction.” Another reason why Paul knew they were genuinely born again is because the gospel came to the people “with deep conviction.” Some translations say “full conviction” (NASB), “full assurance” (NLT), “much assurance” (KJV), while another one says, “absolute certainty” (Amp).

What does “deep conviction” mean? There are two aspects to this “deep conviction.”

- **Their “deep conviction” was theological.** They were fully convinced the gospel was true even to the point of being persecuted for it, and leaving and losing all for it. They had a deep conviction they were saved and they knew it. They were in Christ, but they also were fully convinced that Christ was in them! They were completely assured they were forgiven, born again, adopted into the family of God, that Christ was Lord, that He had died on that cross, and rose again. There were no “buts, maybes, or ifs” with this gospel and with this conviction. They knew it was true and the Holy Spirit was helping them to know it was so.
- **Their “deep conviction” was visible.** Now watch this. Paul says he knew they had been saved because of their “deep conviction.” Conviction is invisible without action. Their assurance, conviction, and certainty produced works and behaviors that testified to the genuine relationship that each had with the Lord. What they said and how they acted flowed out of this deep conviction they had about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Conclusion

How do you know when God is at work in someone's life? Are there any signs that we can look for in our own life and in the life of others when it comes to genuine salvation? Yes, there is. There will be some kind of change in the person brought on by the innate and inherent power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit will convince them that the truths they have heard about Jesus are true and they will begin to see the implications on a greater level. With this, there will also be a deep conviction and an absolute certainty about Jesus that changes what they believe and how they act. Their life begins to be driven by the gospel of Jesus Christ. When this happens in a person's life then you can say with Paul, "For we know, brothers, loved by God, that He has chosen you" (4).