

Theme: God's Word is a means of grace, comfort, light, love and life

Text: LD 25 Part 1

If faith is the necessary condition for us to receive salvation, it is inevitable that we should ask, 'where does this faith come from.' This is the question that is asked in LD 25 of the catechism. This question is the follow-up to the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Since faith alone makes us share in Christ's outside or alien righteousness, how can we get this faith?

The answer of Scripture is that faith is a gift of God (Ephesians 2:8, 9). More specifically, the catechism tells us that the Person of the Holy Spirit works this faith in us by the preaching of the Gospel and strengthens our faith by the use of the sacraments. Our faith has its origins in the work of God, who puts this faith in us through the use of certain tools, which we commonly call 'means' or 'the means of grace.'

LD 25 identifies two 'means of grace' – the preaching of the Word and the sacraments. Our intent is to discuss these in two sermons. If we have any interest in the topic of faith, any intention of remaining faithful to God, any desire to grow in Christ's service, these means ought to capture our attention. There is no way forward in the Christian life without the work of the Holy Spirit through these means.

This afternoon we will give our attention to the means of preaching. God tells us that his Word is the primary means by which he intervenes in our life. In Romans 10, Paul asks, 'how, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? And how can they preach unless they are sent?' Paul clearly expected that the proclaiming of God's Word would be the means by which people would come to faith in the Lord Jesus. This was his own personal experience, as we noticed in 1 Thessalonians 1 in my first sermon here in Abbotsford. Paul experienced that God's Word had a powerful effect on people. In Thessalonica, the Holy Spirit worked through the Word to create faith in the hearts of people. The Holy Spirit brought the Thessalonian believers to new life through the preaching and transformed them in extraordinary ways that made the Thessalonians a model for new believers everywhere.

Why is the Word so powerful? The Word of God has power in our lives because of its author. The Bible is not the work of men, although men were used by God to write it down. Peter wrote that, 'you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation. For prophecy never had its origin in the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.' For this reason Paul describes the Bible to Timothy as a 'God-breathed' book. The divine authorship of the Bible sets it apart from every other book. The Bible contains a truth and a power and a perfection that no other book can claim.

What is the Holy Spirit doing with this book? The catechism says that he works faith in us when the Word is preached. When we say 'preached' we mean the official ministry of preaching in the church, but we do not deny the effectiveness of personal and group Bible Study in addition to this official

preaching ministry. Whenever we are busy with the Bible, the Holy Spirit is working through the Bible to affect us in powerful ways.

This afternoon we want to use Psalm 119 to show how the Holy Spirit uses the Word to work faith in us. Psalm 119 is a long, repetitious song of 176 verses, where every verse but one (v. 122) mentions the Bible using terms like 'law,' 'commandments,' 'precepts,' 'statutes,' 'word,' etc. The song follows the structure of the Hebrew alphabet and is divided into 22 stanzas of eight lines each, each stanza having its lines begin with the next letter of the alphabet. The effect of the Psalm - its length, repetition and connection to the alphabet - is to show that the Word is the most important and central feature in God's work in the life of his church. The Bible deserves more attention than anything else, and it is as basic to our life as the ABC's. There is an ancient tradition that David wrote this Psalm to teach his son Solomon. We can't say whether this tradition is true, but it is plausible. We want to use Psalm 119 to illustrate five different, necessary ways that the Holy Spirit uses the Bible to affect us and work faith in us, whether through preaching or Bible Study. Psalm 119 celebrates God's Word as a means for him to bring grace, comfort, light, love and life into our existence. The Word addresses our sins, strengthens us in our struggles, guides us in our journey, affirms God's covenant of love with us and causes our renewal. We will look at each of these five aspects briefly.

Personal Sin and God's Word of Grace – Psalm 119:33-40

The author of Psalm 119 knew himself to be a sinner. He was aware of the reality and the temptation of sin. He knew, for example, about the temptation to seek selfish gain (v. 36) and 'worthless things' (v. 37). He understood that he himself was a sinner (v. 176) and confessed that he had strayed like a sheep. He knew that sin is the cause of shame (v. 31) and disgrace (v. 37). How did the Psalmist come to this knowledge of sin? By listening to the commandments and precepts of God in his Word. God's Word exposes the reality of our sin and then points us to the answer, which is God's grace. Throughout the Psalm, the author celebrates God's grace as the answer to his sin and weakness. V. 29 – keep me from deceitful ways; be gracious to me through your law. V. 41 – may your unfailing love come to me, O Lord, your salvation according to your promise. V. 58 – I have sought your face with all my heart; be gracious to me according to your promise. V. 132 – turn to me and have mercy on me, as you always do to those who love your name.' In each of these verses, the author links grace to the Word of God. God's Word is a proclamation of God's grace that is endowed with authority, truth and power. God authoritatively proclaims an amnesty to sinners who repent, and he powerfully removes their sins and truthfully declares that he receives forgiven sinners as righteous. This leads the forgiven sinner to turn away from sinful ways and to seek purity and obedience. V. 11 – I have hidden your Word in my heart that I might not sin against you. V. 13 – With my lips I recount all the laws that come from your mouth. V. 15 – I meditate on your precepts and consider your ways.' The Word of God is a powerful tool of the Holy Spirit to address the problem of human sin. He works faith in us by leading us to see and confess our sin, and by helping us to trust in the Lord as the gracious Saviour, and by making us want to thank the Lord by keeping his commandments. God's Word is a means of **grace**. Since we are sinners, we are constantly dependent upon God's Word for the grace conveyed to us through it.

Personal Struggle and God's Word of Comfort – Psalm 119:25-32

The next aspect of God's Word that we want to consider is comfort. The author of Psalm 119 several times gives us a window into the struggles of his life. He experienced contempt and scorn (v. 22 – remove from me scorn and contempt, for I keep your statutes.). He was the target of slander and conspiracy (v. 23 – though rulers sit together and slander me, you servant will meditate on your decrees). These difficulties made the author feel anger (v. 53 – indignation grips me because of the wicked) and grief (v. 136) and oppression (v. 25 – I am laid low in the dust; preserve my life according to your word.) Obedience to the Lord comes at a personal cost, but the believer receives comfort when he turns to the Word of the Lord. In each case that the Psalmist describes his personal trials, he immediately then affirms that the Word of the Lord is where he goes for help. V. 28 – my soul is weary with sorrow; strengthen me according to your word. God's Word is a means of strength and comfort for believers when they face the trials of this life. Persecution, loss, suffering and death oppress all in varying degrees at various times. These are not merely struggles of the body but also of the heart and mind. We search for answers and ask questions and devote ourselves to prayer. God's answer is the hope and comfort and promise that he conveys to us primarily through his Word. The Holy Spirit is deeply concerned for our sorrows and actively assists us using the Word as a means of **comfort**. Since we experience this life as 'no more than a constant death' we are always dependent upon the Word for the comfort it provides.

Personal Guidance and the Word of Light – Psalm 119:105-112

V. 105 is one of the most often quoted verses of Psalm 119. Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my feet. This verse is one of several in Psalm 119 that speak about the power of God's Word to guide us. The Psalm repeatedly refers to life as a journey, way or path that we walk. V. 1 – blessed are they whose ways are blameless. V. 26 – keep me from deceitful ways. V. 30 – I have chosen the way of truth. Life with all its options and choices and crossroads feels like a labyrinth or maze. The endless succession of choices in front of us makes us feel like we are on a steep uphill climb to the top of a mountain whose top always seems out of reach. Which way should we go? What is the best option? How do we make the best out of what seems like a bad set of choices? The author of Psalm 119 viewed God's Word as a solution to these questions. God's Word does not give us specific answers to specific questions, but it teaches us to think like God and to value what he values. If we think in God's way, and if we value what he values, then we will make decisions the way he wants us to make decisions, and we will experience his blessing as a result. We will be able to see past the short-term pain of doing what is right, and we will be able to do the right thing in expectation and hope of God's affirmation in the future. The author of Psalm 119 celebrates God's Word as a light for his feet, and he frequently prayed for God to 'teach me your decrees.' God's Word teaches us how to praise God (v. 12 – Praise be to you, O Lord; teach me your decrees' and how to obey him (v. 33 – teach me, O Lord, to follow your decrees; then I will keep them to the end). The Holy Spirit was poured on the church to lead her, using the Word as a means of **guidance**. Since we do not know the way that we should go, and our hearts were once desperately corrupt, we remain dependent upon the Word for the teaching it gives us about serving our Lord.

Personal Commitment and the Word of Love – Psalm 119:17-24

Our relationship with the Lord doesn't happen the same way as most of our other relationships. God does not walk with us in the garden like he did with Adam and Eve. He does not speak to us face to face like he did with Moses. God keeps himself invisible to us and maintains a relationship with us that is like two friends writing letters to each other. We know that God hears us when we pray, but his response takes the form of a written Word. The Bible is how God talks to us. The Bible is God's covenant conversation with us, the way that he communicates with us most directly. We love the Bible because the Bible is the way that God shows that he loves us. This is why the author of Psalm 119 speaks so affectionately of the Bible. V. 18 – open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law. V. 20 – I am consumed with longing for your laws at all times. V. 47, 48 – For I delight in your commands because I love them. I lift up my hands to your commands, which I love. God tells us that he loves us, and that is why we love to read the Bible so much. The Bible makes it possible for us to live in a relationship of fellowship and love with God. The Bible is a means of **love**. Since we are in covenant with God, we are dependent on his Word as the way that our God declares his fatherly care and affection for us.

Personal Renewal and the Word of Life – Psalm 119:7-80

The author of Psalm 119 believed that God's Word would bring him life. V. 77 – let your compassion come to me that I may live, for your law is my delight. He mentions the concept of being made alive or having his life preserved or renewed over and over in this Psalm. We all need renewal. Like the author of Psalm 119 we are laid low (v. 25) and we are weary (v. 28). Sin weighs us down (v. 4, 5, 7, 8). God refreshes and renews the believer with his Word (v. 25, 37, 101), his promises (v. 50, 116, 154) and his law (v. 149, 156). God's word is a means of **renewal**. Since this renewal process lasts our whole life and involves every aspect of our life, we are always dependent on his Word.

These are five ways that the Holy Spirit works in us by his Word. He uses the Word to expose our need for grace, comfort, guidance, love and renewal. He shows us in his Word how God meets this need through his appointed Saviour Jesus Christ. When we hear and receive this Word, God saves us from sin, upholds us in our struggles, leads us through our choices, assures us of his love and renews us in obedience and strength. When a person has all of these things going on in their life, we can truly say that they have faith. We can see that the Holy Spirit is working faith in him through the Word.

Our conclusion is, then, that we need to have the Word in our life. The preaching of the Word and the study of the Word are absolutely critical and necessary for faith and salvation. The author of Psalm 119 stated over and over his practice of meditating on and studying God's Word. He wanted to busy with the Word day and night. He wanted to know it inside and out. He wanted God to teach him the Word. He knew, as we should know, that God's blessing comes to us through his Word.