# CHANGING THE WORLD

**Genesis 1:1-5**

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.  Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters.  And God said, "Let there be light," and there was light.  God saw that the light was good, and he separated the light from the darkness.  God called the light "day," and the darkness he called "night."  And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day.

**John 1:1-14**

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.  He was with God in the beginning.  Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made.  In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind.  The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God whose name was John.  He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe.  He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.  The true light that gives light to everyone was coming into the world.  He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him.  He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.  Yet to all who did receive him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God.  The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.  We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

**MESSAGE:**

And God said, *"Let there be light," and there was light.*  God spoke and things came into existence.  Light split the darkness, the stars were formed, the galaxies coalesced, and life sprang up out of dust.  There is nothing in the heavens or on the earth to compare with the power of God's mighty Word.

God's mighty word changes human lives every day.  A long time ago it changed the life of a man named Jacob.  Jacob was an extremely smart and clever man who was very good at looking out for himself.  By deceiving his father Isaac, he stole his older brother Esau's inheritance.  Then, when he found out that Esau was plotting to kill him, he ran away to his uncle Laban and went to work for him.  Laban was a shrewd businessman, but Jacob was even shrewder and in the span of twenty years he managed to appropriate a large percentage of his uncle's flocks and married two of his daughters.  When Laban began to "look at him in a different way," Jacob absconded with his wives and flocks and returned to his homeland in Canaan.  But along the way he received news that his brother

Esau had become aware that he was returning and was heading his way with four hundred men.

The last time Jacob had seen Esau, Esau was planning to kill him, so Jacob spent the night before Esau's arrival in prayer, "wrestling with God and begging Him for help." At daybreak God asked Jacob to let Him go, but Jacob refused to let go of God until God gave Him a blessing. So God changed Esau's heart and the two brothers were reconciled. But God did far more than that. He gave Jacob a new name: the name of "Israel." And Jacob lived up to his new Name, becoming the father and patriarch of the twelve tribes of Israel. Jacob had done well using his wits to serve his own purposes but when he used them to serve God, he changed the course of human history.

About 25 hundred years after Jacob, there was a boy in the North African city of Hippo who possessed an exceptional mind. His wealthy parents recognized his unusual gifts and sent him to the University of Carthage, which was the political, economic and cultural center of the Roman Empire in Africa. He studied rhetoric, the art of persuasion. Christianity was a relatively new and flourishing religion there he had no interest in it—the Bible seemed to him an inelegant, crudely written book full of stories about violence and deceit, where the rules of good literary style were seldom followed. Besides, he was drawn to the nightclubs of Carthage and you didn't go to nightclubs to discuss religion. Soon, however, his studies of classical authors like Cicero and Quintilian convinced him that there was more to life than nightclubs.

He moved to Rome and then to Milan where he embraced Neoplatonism—a trendy philosophy which was popular at the time among intellectuals. With the support of several wealthy patrons, he secured a prestigious teaching position at the University of Milan where he led a very pleasant and successful life. Then one day he went to hear a Christian preacher by the name of Ambrose and his life was changed forever. All of his philosophical speculations were swept away by God's Mighty Word and he committed his life to Jesus Christ. He went on to become the most influential theologian in the history of Christianity. We know him as St. Augustine, and the books he wrote laid the foundations of Christian theology for the next thousand years. Transformed by the mighty Word, St. Augustine changed the course of human history.

About twelve hundred years later, there was a young monk in Germany who was furious with God. All that he could feel from God was judgment and wrath. He longed to be righteous but when he looked within himself all he could find was sin and depravity--and guilt, damnable guilt. The thought of God's perfect righteousness and holiness only increased his agony, because it reminded him of how unrighteous and unholy he was. He despaired of ever measuring up to the example of moral and spiritual perfection that God demanded. He wanted to do good, but everything he thought and said was tainted by sin.

Nevertheless, like Jacob, who wrestled with God at the Jabbock River, he refused to let go of God until he received a blessing. And then one day, God came to him just as he

had come to Augustine through the words of St. Ambrose. Gently, he opened the young monk's mind to the prophecy of Habakkuk: "The righteous shall live by faith." Suddenly he realized that he had become so obsessed with trying be righteous by living a morally perfect life he had completely missed out on the Good News that righteousness did not come through human efforts, but was a gift from God. *"…it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God…"*

The message had been there in God's Word all along, just waiting to be discovered. The man's name was Martin Luther, and he later wrote that at that instant, the gates of paradise opened up to him and he felt a joy and peace that he had never known. Luther's influence upon Western Civilization is immense--and it goes beyond religion.

A century later, Sir Issac Newton said of him that his doctrine of the priesthood of all believers opened the door to modern science. That may be why more books have been written about Luther than about anyone else who has ever lived, apart from our Lord Himself. Yet at the end of his life he wrote that he himself had done nothing; God's Word had done everything. Transformed by the mighty word, Luther changed the course of human history.

Two centuries later, there was a young Englishman who was traveling down the road to perdition. He had been raised in a Christian home, but he had rejected his parents' faith and turned into a prodigal son. He became a sailor, the kind of sailor who gives sailors a bad name. He was a drunkard, a whoremonger and a brawler. He so detested the Christian faith that he would seek out believers and try to argue them out of their faith.

After he had been thrown off several different ships, he signed onto a slaver, a British vessel which transported slaves from Africa to the Americas. While he was on the slaver, he routinely committed atrocities against the captive slaves.

After a row with the captain, he was cast off the ship on the west coast of Africa—the Ivory Coast—where he was immediately captured by the soldiers of a black princess and made to be HER slave. She kept him in a cage like an animal and treated him cruelly.

He nearly died from starvation, but finally escaped and signed on a ship bound for England. During the journey, the ship was overtaken by a violent storm and began to founder. As the terrified sailors worked furiously to keep the ship from sinking, the young man found himself quite unexpectedly begging the Lord to save him from drowning.

The storm subsided, and afterwards he borrowed a Bible from a shipmate. He began to read it, and by the time the ship reached England, he was a believer. He went on to become a great Puritan preacher as well as the composer of several hymns, one of which is probably the best-known hymn of all time: *Amazing Grace*. He also became a mentor and confidante of a member of Parliament by the name of William Wilberforce, the man who led the fight to abolish the slave trade in the British Empire.

The man's name was John Newton. On his tombstone there are carved words he himself composed: *"Here lies John Newton, slave of slaves, who was saved by that Gospel he*

*once labored to destroy."* Transformed by the mighty Word, John Newton helped change the course of human history.

Now can anyone seriously believe that the transformation of men like Jacob, Augustine, Luther and Newton into forces that shaped human history can be explained simply by psychological factors? That they just happened to come up with an idea that appealed to people? That they were psychotics who lived in a dreamworld?

These were men who were among the greatest geniuses that the world has known—men who went on to write books like *The City of God* and *The Bondage of the Will*, and songs like *Amazing Grace*—works which have been translated into every language known to man. If a person can believe that things like that "just happen," then he is capable of believing anything. The same mighty Word that created the world transforms the world every day through men like Jacob, Augustine, Luther and Newton.

But words are cheap to us anymore. Anyone can say anything and nobody cares if it's true or not. The plague of postmodernism has been turned loose upon society. Like all intellectual fads it first infected those who were most susceptible: the intelligentsia of our time who are always receptive to intellectual novelties. Who like the Athenians of Paul's time *"…spend their time doing nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas."*

It is not difficult for people to become convinced that they have found something new under the sun. The postmodernists believe that they have discovered a new truth, and that this truth is the perfectly self-negating proposition that there is no such thing as truth. There is only subjective experience which is determined by social environment.

According to their way of thinking, your truth and my truth are equally valid even when they contradict each other, because no objective standards exist for evaluating either one of them. They are, you might say, equally acceptable because they are equally untrue.

In philosophy, there is a name for this kind of thinking: it's call nihilism--the belief in nothing. Like all intellectual fads, postmodernism will pass into the dust heap where the other philosophical novelties in history have ended up, but while it is with us it has done real damage: it has opened the door a little wider to moral anarchy; it has puffed up its adherents with intellectual pride; and it has added to a rising tide of Godlessness and cynicism in the world.

To say that there is no such thing as truth is a self-evident lie, and we know where lies come from: they are the spawn of the one whom Jesus called, "the father of lies." Its adherents are among the people Paul warned of when he wrote: *"See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ."*

But if human words are cheap, God's mighty Word is not. And God's Word tells us plainly that there **is** such a thing as truth and that there **are** such things as lies. And that though lies are many, the truth is one. And that truth is God's Word, which nourishes our faith

and sets us free from our sins. *"If you continue in my Word,"* said Jesus, *"you will know the truth and the truth will set you free."*

Apart from the Scriptures themselves, this has never been said any better than it is in a hymn which we sang today, a hymn which was written by a Missouri Synod pastor who taught at the St. Louis seminary back in the 1940's and 50's. His name was Martin Franzmann and the hymn is *Thy Strong Word*. Listen to some of the words:

Thy strong word did cleave the darkness
At thy bidding it was done
For created light we thank thee
While thy ordered seasons run.
Thy strong word proclaims us righteous
Bright with thine own holiness
Glorious now we press toward glory
And our lives our hopes confess.
Allelujah! Allelujah!
May the light which thou dost send
Fill our songs with alleluias,
Alleluias without end!

Father in heaven: In the beginning, Your Mighty Word created the heavens and the earth, all matter and energy, and life itself. Even today, here in Your Holy House, Your Mighty Word washes away our sins, nourishes our faith, and re-creates us, ever more like the image of Your Son, Your Word incarnate. Send your Holy Spirit into our hearts and minds, Father, and move us each day to avail ourselves of Your Mighty Word so that we may continue to know the truth that makes us free.

Father, send your Spirit into the hearts and minds of those who are suffering, whether from sickness or injury or emotional distress or financial hardship. Bless the families of all who worship here today, so that where there is strife or tension, it might give way to peace and to love. Let your divine shalom rest on each one of us and help us to be peace-makers in our homes, our jobs, and among our friends.

Bless this congregation, Father, and kindle in our hearts the desire to impart our faith to people in the unbelieving world. Give us lips to sing thy glory, tongues thy mercy to proclaim, throats that shout the hope that fills us, mouths to speak Thy Holy Name. Amen.