

“Scripture Alone”

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I don't know how many of you have ever looked at the church's business cards, but if you have, you may have noticed something strange on the back of the cards. If you turn one of those cards over, you'll see a map of where the church building is located. That's not the strange part. The strange part are some foreign words on the left-hand side of the card. There are five phrases written in Latin:

Sola Scriptura
Sola Gratia
Sola Fide
Solus Christus
Soli Deo Gloria

Underneath those phrases are English words that give us the meaning of those Latin words:

The Bible Alone
By Grace Alone
Through Faith Alone
In Christ Alone
For the Glory of God Alone

Why are those words there? Well, the simple explanation is that John Battenfield, who designed the church logo, designed these cards, and he decided to put those words on the back. The reason he did that is because he knows that I subscribe to them. The more important reason is that these phrases are principles that came out of the Protestant Reformation. They describe, quite briefly, what a faithful, biblical Christian faith looks like.

You may wonder, how can there be five “alones”? Shouldn't there be only one? Well, they're “alone” in five different senses. The Bible is the only written word of God. Since God is the greatest authority, and since his written word is an extension of his authority, the Bible is our authoritative knowledge of God, salvation, and how to live for God. In other words, our inerrant, infallible knowledge of God is not found in the Bible and tradition, but only in the Bible.

We are reconciled to God by grace alone. That means salvation is a gift. It is not grace plus merit; in other words, our salvation isn't partly God's gift and partly something we have

earned. If salvation were 99 percent gift and one percent our work, you can be sure we would mess that one percent up.

The way we receive that gift of salvation is by faith alone, not faith and works. Even our faith is a gift from God. The one who is reconciled to God is reconciled only on the basis of trusting God entirely for salvation. It's true that a real faith will lead to good works, but those good works don't add to our salvation.

We are reconciled to God in Christ alone. Jesus is the only mediator between God and sinful humans. There is no other savior.

And everything exists, ultimately, for the glory of God alone.

Those are principles of true, biblical Christianity that were recovered during the Protestant Reformation. And this year is the five hundredth anniversary of an event that is, at least symbolically, the beginning of the Reformation. On October 31, 1517, a German monk, priest, and university professor named Martin Luther (1483–1546), nailed a document to the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg. This document was his famous *Ninety-Five Theses*, which are short statements against what he perceived to be the corruption of the Roman Catholic Church. Luther was bothered by the sale of indulgences. The Catholic Church teaches that indulgences can reduce the amount of time that someone spends in purgatory after death. A Dominican friar named Johann Tetzel was selling indulgences in order to rebuild St. Peter's Basilica in Rome. Apparently, Tetzel claimed that giving money to this cause could cover all sins. He encouraged people to buy indulgences for their dead relatives, using this sales pitch: "As soon as the coin in the coffer rings, the soul from purgatory springs."¹

Luther knew that this was contrary to what Scripture taught. In the years leading up to 1517, Luther had been studying and teaching the text of the Bible, particularly books like Romans and Galatians. He came to realize that the Bible taught that our right standing with God comes through grace by way of faith. It is a gift of God, given to undeserving sinners, and it is received by trusting God's promises.

So, Luther realized that what the Catholic Church taught about salvation, and what it was doing through the sale of indulgences, was wrong. He protested by writing his *Ninety-Five Theses*. Among the theses, we find statements like these:

¹ Matthew Barrett, *God's Word Alone—The Authority of Scripture: What the Reformers Taught . . . and Why It Still Matters* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2016), 35.

27. Those who assert that a soul straightway flies out (of purgatory) as a coin tinkles in the collection-box, are preaching an invention of man.²
53. They are the enemies of Christ and of the people who, on account of the preaching of indulgences, bid the word of God be silent in other churches.³
54. A wrong is done to the word of God when in the same sermon an equal or a longer time is devoted to indulgences than to God's word.⁴
79. It is blasphemy to say that the cross adorned with the papal arms is as effectual as the cross of Christ.⁵
80. Bishops, curates and theologians who allow such teaching to be preached to the people will have to render an account.⁶

In his statements, Luther didn't outright reject the Catholic Church. But he thought that some of its practices were contrary to what is in the Bible, and therefore should be corrected.

Luther sent his protests to Albert, the Archbishop of Mainz, who sent them to Rome. Within a few weeks, his theses had spread throughout Europe. As you can imagine, Luther got in trouble with the Church. (One must keep in mind that the Roman Catholic Church was *the* church of Europe.) In 1520, the Pope said Luther would be excommunicated unless he recanted. Luther burned the Pope's letter. The Pope then issued another statement of excommunication at the beginning of 1521 and called the Emperor, Charles V, to put it into effect. The Emperor desired to hear from Luther and gave him one more chance to recant. So, an imperial assembly was convened in the city of Worms. At the end of that assembly, Luther said these words:

Unless I am convinced by the testimony of the Scriptures or by clear reason (for I do not trust either in the pope or in councils alone, since it is well known that they often err and contradict themselves), I am bound by the Scriptures I have quoted and my conscience is captive to the Word of God. I cannot and I will not retract anything, since it is neither safe nor right to go against conscience. I cannot do otherwise, here I stand, may God help me, Amen.⁷

Luther, fearing he would be put to death for heresy, then hid in the Wartburg Castle in Wittenberg. While there, he translated the New Testament into German. Prior to this time, the only available translation of the Bible was the Latin Vulgate, which was 1,100 years old. Luther wanted to have the Bible available in the language that people could read and understand. Later,

² Martin Luther, "The Ninety-Five Theses," in *Documents of the Christian Church*, ed. Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 207.

³ *Ibid.*, 209.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Barrett, *God's Word Alone*, 45.

he supervised a translation of the entire Bible, which was finished in 1534. It is estimated that half a million copies of this Bible were distributed by the time of Luther's death in 1546.⁸

Luther was not alone. Others wanted to go back to the Bible to rediscover what God had spoken. William Tyndale translated most of the Bible into English before he was executed in 1536. Yes, it was illegal to translate the Bible into the vernacular language. Only some Reformers gave their lives, but all shared the same concern. They wanted to recover true Christianity by going back to the source, the Bible. Why would these people risk their lives to translate the Bible into their own languages and to oppose the doctrines of the Catholic Church? They did this because they knew that the words of the Bible are life-giving and vital. They knew what a treasure Scripture is, and they gave their lives to hear from God in his written word.

They also had concerns about what the Church was teaching in their day. Their concerns were captured by Luther, who wrote the following in a 1521 treatise titled *The Misuse of the Mass*: "The saints could err in their writings and the sin in their lives, but the Scriptures cannot err."⁹ Luther recognized that the Bible alone is God's written word, whereas the writings of all the theologians throughout history were not God's word. God doesn't make mistakes or lie, but human beings can be mistaken. Therefore, all our true knowledge of God should be based on the Bible, not on the writings of theologians. Of course, the writings of theologians may be helpful insofar as they rightly interpret Scripture. Luther, Calvin, and others often referred to earlier theologians like Augustine. But they knew that theologians could be wrong, and that is why we need to keep coming back to the Scriptures, to make sure that our knowledge of God is accurate.

So, this year, we celebrate the Reformation. And this isn't just some interesting history. This is always relevant. As long as we need to hear from God and need to know how to be reconciled to him, this issue will be relevant. As long as we wonder how we can rightly live for God, this issue will be relevant.

We are bombarded with so many messages, so many words, and so many voices. How do we know whom to trust? How do we know who is telling the truth? How do we hear from God?

I can't answer this question fully this morning, but I want to give a brief overview of *Sola Scriptura* by looking at a few passages in the Bible. First, let us turn to the book of Hebrews, in the New Testament. I'll read the first four verses of the first chapter.

⁸ Ibid., 51.

⁹ Ibid., 40.

¹ Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, ² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. ³ He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, ⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.¹⁰

We don't know who wrote the book of Hebrews. But whoever wrote it, he wanted us to know that Jesus is superior to all angels, prophets, and priests. The covenant he inaugurated, the "new covenant," is superior to the old covenant made with Israel through Moses at Mount Sinai. Jesus is God's fullest and final revelation of himself.

I want to make a few observations about those verses. First, it says that God spoke. God is not silent. The God who made the world and everything in it has spoken. This is good news. God did not create the universe only to allow us to guess at meaning and truth. He has spoken, and we can know him.

Second, God has spoken "at many times and in many ways." God hasn't spoken just once, but multiple times. He spoke audibly to some people, like Adam and Eve, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, among others. Sometimes, he spoke to people through dreams and visions.

Third, God has spoken "to our fathers by the prophets." From the author's perspective, this means that God spoke the Old Testament through prophets, men such as Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, and others. God did speak directly to some people, but more often than not, God spoke *through* prophets. He spoke through their writings.

This is something that the apostle Peter mentions in his second letter. After describing his experience of Jesus' transfiguration, when Jesus appeared in his glory as the Son of God and when he heard the audible voice of God the Father, Peter says this:

¹⁹ And we have the prophetic word more fully confirmed, to which you will do well to pay attention as to a lamp shining in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts, ²⁰ knowing this first of all, that no prophecy of Scripture comes from someone's own interpretation. ²¹ For no prophecy was ever produced by the will of man, but men spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:19–21).

¹⁰ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

When Peter refers to the “prophecy of Scripture,” he seems to be referring back to the Old Testament, which predicted Jesus’ coming. He says that this Scripture was not produced by men. He means that they didn’t simply invent whatever they wrote. No, they were “carried along by the Holy Spirit.” How this works, we don’t really know. What it means is that God didn’t simply dictate what he wanted written. He worked through these prophets, carrying them along to write what he wanted written. But he did this in concert with their own experiences, ideas, and cultural references. So, we can say that the Bible has dual authorship. The letters of Paul are really Paul’s letters. But they’re also God’s word, because God had Paul write exactly what he wanted written, without turning Paul into a mindless writing machine.

So, the Old Testament is the result of God speaking at many times and in many ways to the prophets, who wrote down what the Holy Spirit guided them to write. What about the New Testament?

The author of Hebrews says that “in these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son.” There’s a lot of meaning packed into those two words. Jesus is God’s Son, and, as the next verse says, he is “radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature.” He is a perfect representation and revelation of God the Father. And Jesus is the creator of the world, so he is clearly God himself. Jesus is the fullest and clearest revelation of God. That’s why John calls Jesus “the Word” at the beginning of his Gospel (John 1:1–18).

If that is true, then we must think about this: the only reason we know Jesus is because of the writings of the apostles and those who wrote down the testimony of the apostles. Apostles like Matthew and John wrote Gospels, biographies of Jesus. Others like Peter, Paul, and James wrote letters. Mark wrote a Gospel based on Peter’s recollections. Luke wrote a Gospel and the book of Acts based on eyewitness testimony, and we know he was familiar with Paul. In the book of Ephesians, Paul says that the church is “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph. 2:20). Jesus is the cornerstone of the church, the one who determines the church’s size and shape. The apostles and prophets who wrote the New Testament are the foundation, and the foundation is laid once. All our theology is built on that foundation.

It’s interesting that we don’t have any words of Jesus written down within the first hundred-plus years after his death and resurrection other than the words we find in the Bible. We

do have references to Jesus in non-biblical works.¹¹ But only in the Bible do we find Jesus' words and only in the Bible do we find clear theological reflections in his life, death, and resurrection written by eyewitnesses. I don't think this is an accident. I believe that God is in control of history, and that God reserves the right to be his own interpreter. The Bible is God's written word. It is from God and it is primarily about God. If Jesus is the clearest revelation of God, it makes sense that God would want Jesus to be known clearly. He wouldn't want confusing, competing versions of Jesus to be written. In order to know Jesus, the fullest revelation of God, we need to know the Bible.

But Jesus is also the final revelation of God. I think that's what is intended when we read "in these last days." In the New Testament, we have this idea of two ages: this age, and the age to come. In Matthew 12:32, when Jesus says that blaspheming the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, he says it won't be forgiven "either in this age or in the age to come." There are many references in the New Testament to "this age," the age between Jesus' first and second comings (Luke 20:34; 1 Cor. 1:20; 2:8; 3:18; Gal. 1:4; 1 Tim. 6:7). Judgement day will come at the end of "this age" (Matt. 13:39–40, 49; 24:3). And eternal life is found in "that age" (Luke 20:35) or "the age to come" (Mark 10:30). The New Testament says that the time between Jesus' comings is the "last days" (Acts 2:17; 2 Tim. 3:1; 2 Pet. 3:3). And in this era, after the New Testament was written, there is no need for more revelation about Jesus. We know enough about Jesus to trust him and be reconciled to God and to live as God's people.

I say that because some people may wonder why we should trust an "old book" that was completed over 1,900 years ago. Here's my answer. First, if God wrote the book through human authors, and if God knows everything, including the future, and God is perfectly wise and good and never lies (Num. 23:19; 2 Tim. 2:13; Tit. 1:2; Heb. 6:18), then it doesn't matter how old the book is. Since God knows all times equally well, when he authored those words, he knew what would happen today. He knows what will happen in the future, too. So, it doesn't matter when the words were written. Second, the Bible isn't a book that is meant to describe all human history. It's not a technical manual, a scientific textbook, a dictionary, or an encyclopedia.¹²

¹¹ See the sermon, "How Can We Know Jesus," December 14, 2014, <https://wbcommunity.org/jesus>.

¹² Listen to the Bible study, "What the Bible Is and What the Bible Does," <https://wbcommunity.org/how-to-read-the-bible>.

No, the Bible is a covenantal book. We even see that in the word “Testament,” which comes from the Latin word *Testamentum*, which means “covenant.” A covenant is a pact or agreement that describes how God relates to his people. God initiates covenants with people and makes promises to them. Covenants also make demands of God’s people. The Old Testament describes the covenants made with Adam, Noah, Abraham, Israel, David, and the promise of the New Covenant. Most of the Old Testament concerns Israel under the “old covenant” made through Moses at Mount Sinai. That covenant demanded obedience to God’s law. Failure to obey would separate people from God.

The New Testament concerns the “new covenant,” which was made through Jesus’ death on the cross (Matt. 26:27–28). There will not be a “newer covenant.” The new covenant promises forgiveness of sins, transformation through the Holy Spirit, and real, personal knowledge of God (Jer. 31:31–34; Ezek. 36:25–27). It is based on Jesus’ perfect obedience, because he perfectly fulfilled God’s law for us. There is nothing better than the new covenant. There is no new information we need to be part of God’s covenant people. We know enough about Jesus to trust that he lived the perfect human life (the kind that we should but can’t live because of our sin), that he died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin (because sin must be punished and removed from God’s creation), and that he rose from the grave as a promise that God will someday resurrect the world and his people. We will then live with Jesus forever in a perfect world.

The Bible describes God’s great acts of salvation. Many theologians say that the Bible is about redemptive history. It tells of great and significant events like the creation of the world and of human beings, of the rebellion of humans against God and our fall into sin, of God making covenants and promises, of God bringing Israel out of slavery in Egypt and into the Promised Land, and of Israel’s continued sin. And then it tells us about God sending his Son to redeem a people of his choosing. Anyone who turns from sin and trusts in Jesus is part of that people, whether they walked this earth millennia ago or whether they walk the earth right now. The terms are the same: we must have faith in Jesus.

The next great saving act in redemptive history will be Jesus’ second coming. We’re given some information about that in the Bible. So, there is nothing to add to the Bible. In “the age to come,” we’ll be with Jesus in eternity, and then we can hear directly from him.

My point so far is that God has spoken through prophets, and he has spoken through his Son, and we know his Son through the apostles. If we want to hear God, we must read (or hear) the Bible.

There's one more passage I want to look at, a quite famous one. It shows us what the purpose of the Bible is. Let's turn to 2 Timothy 3:10–17. This is part of the apostle Paul's second letter to Timothy.

¹⁰ You, however, have followed my teaching, my conduct, my aim in life, my faith, my patience, my love, my steadfastness, ¹¹ my persecutions and sufferings that happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra—which persecutions I endured; yet from them all the Lord rescued me. ¹² Indeed, all who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted, ¹³ while evil people and impostors will go on from bad to worse, deceiving and being deceived. ¹⁴ But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it ¹⁵ and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶ All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

Clearly, Paul wants Timothy to know that he has been honest in his dealings, even suffering persecution, in order to live a godly life. He also wants Timothy to know that there are deceitful people who deceive others. He tells Timothy to continue in the faith that he has learned, which he learned from “the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” He's surely referring to the Old Testament, because that's what Timothy would have known as the sacred writings. The New Testament was in the process of being written. But Timothy would have regarded Paul's gospel message as on the same level as the Old Testament, because that gospel message told him about Jesus.

And then Paul tells Timothy that “all Scripture is breathed out by God.”¹³ God breathed out the words of the Bible. He sounded the words through the instruments of the human authors of the Bible, the way a trumpet player blows through a trumpet to produce music. The Bible is God's sounding to mankind. And what does it do? Besides making people wise for salvation, it teaches us, it corrects us, and it equips to do good work for God. This is what the Bible does. If

¹³ Paul may very well have only the Old Testament in view, but he also recognizes that other New Testament writings were Scripture. In 1 Timothy 5:18, he quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 and Luke 10:7, calling them both “Scripture.” Furthermore, in 2 Peter 3:15–16, Peter regards Paul's letters as Scripture, for he talks about deceitful people who twist the meaning of those letters, “as they do the other Scriptures.”

we want to be reconciled to God, know him truly, be taught and equipped and even corrected by him, we need to read the Bible.

Sola Scriptura, or “Scripture alone,” simply means that only the Bible is God’s written word. It doesn’t mean that we should only read the Bible. It doesn’t mean that the Bible is the only source of truth. We can and should read other books. We should learn about God’s creation by reading books about history, science, philosophy, and even novels that artfully capture something of the human condition. But we should never confuse those books—or any other words—with the Bible. The Bible is ultimately the work of a God who knows all things and who never lies. All other words are the products of finite human beings who don’t know all things and can and do make mistakes, whether they are honest or dishonest mistakes.

This is what one theologian, David Broughton Knox, says about the Bible:

“The canon [of the Bible] then is a very simple concept. It is putting into one classification or pigeon-hole those writings of which God is the Author, and putting into the other pigeon-hole all other writings which people have written—with a greater or lesser degree of truth—but which were not written by the direct inspiration of the Holy Spirit to convey God’s mind and Word to the reader, and are consequently not authoritative over the conscience.”¹⁴

Only God’s words are ultimately authoritative. Great works of literature can be inspiring and even illuminating, but they are not authoritative or inerrant. The words of family, friends, professors, or other so-called experts are not completely true and wise. The words of historians, even if not in error, aren’t normative. They can tell us *what* happened, but they can’t tell us what *should have* happened.¹⁵

Sola Scriptura doesn’t mean that we don’t need teachers. After all, the Bible says that we need pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11). So, this concept doesn’t mean we as individuals study the Bible alone. We need to read the Bible in community. But even teachers can be mistaken, and their words need to be checked against the Bible (Acts 17:10–11).

¹⁴ David Broughton Knox, *D. Broughton Knox: Select Works*, vol. 1, *The Doctrine of God*, ed. Tony Payne (Kingsford, NSW: Matthias Media), 47, quoted in Graham A. Cole, “Why a Book? Why This Book? Why the Particular Order within This Book? Some Theological Reflections on the Canon,” in *The Enduring Authority of the Christian Scriptures*, ed. D. A. Carson (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 467.

¹⁵ The naturalistic fallacy states that we cannot derive an “ought” from an “is.” That is, just because something is the case doesn’t mean it ought to be the case. Similarly, we cannot derive an “ought” from a “was.” Just because something was the case doesn’t mean it ought to have been the case.

My question for us is, do we read the Bible? Are we letting God speak to us? Do we trust that it is the only inerrant, divinely inspired, authoritative word that can bring us to a saving knowledge of God? Do we trust that it is God speaking to us to teach us and correct us? If we understand that the Bible is God's word and that God is perfect, we will understand that the Bible can and will correct us, since we are not perfect. That's what understanding means. We stand under the Bible. We don't stand over it in judgment, determining what is right and what is wrong, deciding what is truth and what is lie. As one theologian says, "[C]orrect interpretation requires that we must submit ourselves to the Bible's interpretation of us."¹⁶

Toward the beginning of the Bible, we read of a deceiver, a mysterious serpent, who approaches the first woman, Eve. What are the first words out of this deceiver's mouth? "Did God actually say . . .?" (Gen. 3:1). That question is alive today. I have already read from 2 Peter and 2 Timothy. Many biblical scholars believe that these letters weren't written by Peter and Timothy, but were written in their name. They try to convince us that the Bible doesn't tell us the truth. I am familiar with their arguments and I believe they are wrong. Their arguments are weak, built almost entirely on speculation. In fact, in seminary I wrote a 40-page paper on the authorship of 2 Peter, and I'm convinced that it is indeed the work of Peter. I think people attack these books of the Bible because they stress the importance of right belief and they highlight the work of false teachers.

Some people believe the Bible is somehow God's word and should be authoritative (on some level), but that it also contains errors. In response to views like this, the theologian Matthew Barrett writes, "Because it is God speaking—and he is a God of truth, not error—his Word must be true and trustworthy in all that it addresses. . . . Should Scripture contain errors, it is unclear why we should trust Scripture as our supreme and final authority."¹⁷ He also writes, "Repeated attacks on Scripture's own character reveal the enmity and hostility toward the God of the Bible within our own souls."¹⁸

Attacking the authority of Scripture or questioning the truth of Scripture was not how Jesus approached the Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament. When that ancient deceiver, Satan, tempted Jesus in the wilderness, Jesus answered him by quoting Scripture (Matt. 4:1–11/Luke

¹⁶ Barrett, *God's Word Alone*, 61.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 25.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 22.

4:1–13). One of those Old Testament verses that Jesus quoted was, “Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God” (Matt. 4:4; Deut. 8:3). Jesus called the Old Testament the “word of God” (Matt. 15:6; John 10:35). He said that he didn’t come to abolish the Scriptures, but to fulfill them (Matt. 5:17). He said the Scriptures cannot be broken (John 10:35). We can’t pick and choose which ones we pay heed to. Jesus said that all Scripture points to him (Luke 24:27, 44; John 5:39).

If we follow Jesus, we must take his view of Scripture. We must stand under it, yield to it, submit to it, use it to ward off temptation, and listen to it so that we know how to live for God. Jesus came to speak the words of God the Father (John 7:16; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10, 24). He told the apostles that the Holy Spirit would lead them to know greater truth (John 14:26; 16:13–15). If we know Jesus, we will listen to the Father’s word, delivered by the Son and by the Holy Spirit through the prophets and apostles.

Let me end with more words from the apostle Peter (1 Pet. 1:22–25):

²² Having purified your souls by your obedience to the truth for a sincere brotherly love, love one another earnestly from a pure heart, ²³ since you have been born again, not of perishable seed but of imperishable, through the living and abiding word of God; ²⁴ for

“All flesh is like grass
and all its glory like the flower of grass.
The grass withers,
and the flower falls,
²⁵ but the word of the Lord remains forever.”

And this word is the good news that was preached to you.