

The Gospel of God

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[0 : 00] Let me start with a story that you may have heard before. It's a story about a Wesleyan chapel in Switzerland.

An English lady wrote to a country inn in Switzerland inquiring about some accommodation. She ended her letter by saying that she preferred to be as close as possible to the amenities, which she called the WC, short for water closet, which of course in England means toilet.

Now the innkeeper was not familiar with this term for toilet and thought that the WC must refer to the Wesleyan chapel located a few miles away. And so he sent this reply, Dear Madam, I take great pleasure in informing you that the WC is situated nine miles from the inn among some lovely pine trees.

It is capable of holding 229 people, but it's open only on Sundays and Thursdays. It may interest you to know that my daughter was married there.

You will also be glad to hear that some people bring their lunches and make a day of it. I would recommend your ladyship go in the morning where there is organ accompaniment. My wife, unfortunately, is not able to attend regularly.

[1 : 17] It has almost been a year since she last went. And it naturally pains her very much not to be able to go more often. Sincerely, Frederick.

The lady was faint with shock at the innkeeper's response. She sat down and glanced at another letter with similar handwriting.

She opened it and read, Dear Madam, my apologies for not including the address of the Wesley Chapel or WC as you called it. It is Nine Grocery Road to Sino, Switzerland.

Sincerely, Frederick. And then the lady smiled and breathed a sigh of relief for this news changed everything. Now, this story reminds us of two truths.

First, that we can misunderstand all sorts of things. And second, that some news changes everything. This morning, we're going to be considering some news that changes everything.

[2 : 10] That is, the gospel. As we begin a new sermon series in the book of Romans. But first, how about I pray lest we misunderstand it. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word, the Bible.

And we thank you particularly for this letter to the Romans. For in it contains, so thoroughly explained, the gospel. The gospel by which you have saved us.

The gospel by which you have brought us into your family, into your kingdom. The gospel which gathers us here this morning. Father, we pray that you would help us to understand this passage. But more than that, to live in light of it.

For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, as I mentioned, we're beginning a new sermon series in the book of Romans. And perhaps more than any other book of the Bible, this has changed everything.

For example, it was the letter that converted the great Bishop Augustine of Hippo. I've got a picture of him on the slide there. He's looking rather solemn. Perhaps it was before he read Romans, as was converted.

[3 : 12] But certainly, it was through reading the book of Romans that he was converted, and then had a significant influence on the early church. It was also the book that Martin Luther, which is the next slide, was reflecting on.

And verse 17 of today's passage, in particular, that converted Martin Luther. And from there, sparked the great reformation of the 1600s, which changed everything, including us here today. It's why we meet, in part, why we meet here today. But why has this letter to the Romans had such an impact? Well, because this letter is all about the gospel. And the gospel changes lives, doesn't

it?

Paul starts this letter with the gospel, and he ends with the gospel. In very strikingly similar language, actually. If you look at the first seven verses and the last three verses, it's very similar language.

We don't have time to do that, though, this morning. And in between, this book ends about the gospel. Paul unpacks the gospel. In such a systematic way, that it's unlike any other book in the New Testament.

[4 : 14] In fact, Romans has been called a handbook of Christian doctrine or teaching. And it's because this letter so thoroughly unpacks the gospel, that it has changed so many people, like Augustine and Luther.

Of course, to understand it, we must remember that it's still a letter, written to real people in real situation, and not simply a handbook of Christian doctrine or teaching. Paul wrote to Christians in Rome, some of whom were Jews and some of whom were Gentiles or non-Jews.

And there were some issues that he wanted to address, some issues between them. They weren't getting on all that well. So he writes to address those issues. And he also writes to seek their support, for he plans to go on a missionary journey to Spain, and he wants to stop off at Rome to be helped for that journey.

And while Paul also knew many people at this church, he also knew that he had not started it. He had not planted it. And so he begins his letter by outlining the gospel and his credentials, so that they might be willing to listen to him.

And so firstly, he wants them to know that the gospel he preaches is not one he's invented. No, it's God's gospel. Point one, on the back of the reading is the outline. Point one, verse one.

[5 : 30] So verse one and two, Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God, the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, he says.

Here, Paul starts off by saying he's a servant of Christ Jesus. Of course, the word Christ means king or Messiah. And so what he's saying is he is a servant of King Jesus.

But he's also called to be an apostle, he says. The word apostle means a messenger or a missionary who is sent on behalf of another. And because they are sent on behalf of another, then they carry that person's authority.

I've tried to do this with my children before. If one child comes to me, for example, Kate says to me, so-and-so is mucking up, I send her back to them with a message.

Stop or else. And she goes. She's my apostle, if you like. I've sent her. And she carries my authority, which is very quickly ignored. But Paul is sent by Jesus, isn't he?

[6 : 36] Rode to Damascus. He's called to be an apostle. Sent by Jesus and carries his authority. This is the first reason they ought to listen to him. But the second reason is that this gospel that Paul preaches is not his own invention.

It is God's gospel. Verse 1 says he has been set apart to preach the gospel of God. And now the word gospel simply means news or significant news.

It can be good news or bad news, depending on who you are. But this news is not from Paul, but from God. It is God's gospel, God's news. And what's more, verse 2 says that this gospel was promised through the Old Testament, through the prophets in the Holy Scriptures, it says.

In other words, it's not some last-minute random thought of God. No, no, God has been working towards this. It is part of his long-promised plan to save people.

You see, the readers ought to listen to Paul, not only because he is Christ's sent messenger, but because what he speaks is not his own invention, but God's long-promised news.

[7 : 44] But what is this news about? Well, verse 3 and 4, it's regarding his son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David and who through the spirit of holiness was appointed the son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.

God's gospel, God's news is all about his son, regarding his son, Jesus. And then it goes on to tell us something about Jesus in the rest of verses 3 and 4, doesn't it?

Now, when most people read verses 3 and 4, they often think verse 3 is talking about Jesus' human nature, you know, descended from David, and they think that verse 4 is talking about Jesus' divine nature, you know, son of God.

But we need to remember that phrase, son of God, actually means king. Do you remember in the Bible, God made a promise to King David that every king after him would be called a son of God. That's what it's talking about here. And we see it in places, not only in 2 Samuel 7, but also Psalm 2. And so what Paul is saying here is, follow with me from verse 3, regarding his son, God the Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David.

[9 : 00] That is, he became a man and was the Christ who was from David's line. You see, it's very important that he was from the right family because the promised Christ, the promised king, would come from David's family line, from David's family tree, so to speak.

I remember having to do a project on our family tree, my own family tree, and I came home and I asked my mother if there was anything special about our family. Nope, we're boring, she said. But then we did find out that one of my ancestors was a convict from England who apparently jumped ship when they arrived in Australia and changed his surname from Thomas to Price.

So I could have been Andrew Thomas and I come from a family of criminals. But God the Son was born as a man and comes from the royal family of David.

He was adopted into it by Joseph, his earthly father. And so what Paul is saying here in verse 3 is that Jesus, who has always been God the Son, also became the Son of God, the King, the Christ, because he came from David's line.

Indeed, we get glimpses of this during his earthly life, that he is the Christ. People call him the Christ. The wise men bring him kingly gifts and so on. But we also get glimpses of his frailty and weakness.

[10 : 21] I mean, he got tired, hungry. And though he himself never sinned, he certainly suffered from living in a sinful world, particularly by being humiliated at the cross.

But then verse 4 says that at his resurrection, he is appointed to be the Son of God, or King, in power. No longer weakness, in power. Remember after Jesus' resurrection, he comes to his disciples and he says, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

You see, at the resurrection of Jesus, he is given all power so that he is no longer Christ the humiliated, but instead Christ the Lord. Indeed, this is how Paul finishes verse 4.

He says the gospel is about Jesus Christ, our Lord. And because he has conquered sin and death by his death and resurrection, then he has power to give us life too.

This is God's news about his Son, that Jesus Christ is Lord. And if Jesus is Lord, then this changes everything. For it means all people must trust and obey him as their Lord, because that's who he is.

[11 : 33] And this is exactly what Paul goes on to say in verses 5 to 6. He says, Through him, through Jesus, we receive grace and apostleship to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his namesake.

And you also are among those Gentiles who are called to belong to Jesus Christ. You see, if I asked you, why preach the gospel? What would you say?

Would you say because God tells us to? Because it's loving? Or because, you know, people need to be saved from judgment? They're all true. But if you ask Paul the primary reason for preaching the gospel, he would say, for Jesus' sake, for his name's sake, verse 5.

You see, Jesus is Lord. And so he is to preach the gospel and call people to obedience and trust in this Lord. He's to do it for Jesus' sake.

Do you see the logic of verse, end of verse 4, Jesus Christ our Lord, therefore, verse 5, God chose Paul to be an apostle to call all the Gentiles to the obedience that comes from faith for his name's sake.

[12 : 43] This is why Paul preaches the gospel. And because God has called him to especially preach it to the Gentiles or non-Jews, then he is eager to preach it, the gospel, to those Gentiles in Rome also. Which brings us to point 2 in verse 8.

Paul says, first, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you because your faith is being reported all over the world. The world here probably means the known world rather than the literal world.

And having Christians in Rome, which was the capital of the then known world, was very significant. It no doubt would have been reported amongst Christians throughout the Roman Empire and would have been an encouragement to them.

And so Paul gives thanks for this. Yet he also prays that he might see them. Have a look at verse 9. He says, God whom I serve in my spirit in preaching the gospel of his Son is my witness.

How constantly I remember you in my prayers at all times. And I pray that now at last by God's will the way may be open for me to come to you.

[13 : 47] Or verse 13, I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I plan many times to come to you but have been prevented from doing so until now. You see, Paul prays that he might be able to see them.

He's eager to preach the gospel to them. He's been longing to meet with them. Why hasn't he been able to so far? Well, it actually tells us later on in the letter. On the next slide is a couple of verses from chapter 15 where Paul says, It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, where it hasn't been preached before, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation.

This is why I have often been hindered from coming to you. See, this is why he hasn't made it to Rome yet because he's been busy planting new churches where there were none, preaching the gospel to those who had not heard about Jesus but now he longs to see them.

Why? Well, come back with me to verse 11. He says, I long to see you so that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to make you strong. Now, he doesn't have a particular gift in mind here.

He actually explains himself in verse 12. He says, that is, that you and I may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith. I do not want you to be unaware, brothers and sisters, that I plan many times to come to you but have been prevented from doing so until now in order that I might have a harvest among you just as I have had among the other Gentiles.

[15 : 14] You see, Paul wants to strengthen them, to encourage them, to have a harvest among them, he says, to help them grow in godliness as Christians. But how is he going to do that?

Well, he says, by imparting some spiritual gift, which as verse 12 makes clear, means sharing his faith to strengthen them. And his faith, what he believes, is essentially the gospel.

In other words, he's going to preach the gospel to them to strengthen them. Indeed, he's obligated to do so. See verse 14? He says, I am obligated both to Greeks and to non-Greeks, both to the wise and to the foolish.

That is why I'm so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are in Rome. See, Paul is eager to preach the gospel to them that he may strengthen them through it.

But hang on a second, aren't they already Christians? Verse 6 and 7 say so. So why does he need to preach the gospel to them? Aren't they already converted?

[16 : 13] Well, we need to remember two things here. First, the word gospel is like an expandable bag, if you like. You can actually fill it with more and more things. So the word gospel or news can mean Jesus Christ is Lord.

It can be as simple as that. Or you can expand it to mean Jesus Christ is the Lord who died for us and rose again. Or you can actually expand it to include all people have fallen short of the glory of God and deserve judgment, but because God so loved the world, he gave his one and only son to die for us and rise again.

Do you see what I mean? You can expand this word and so on. So when Paul says that he's eager to preach the gospel to them, he probably means more than just Jesus Christ is Lord.

He's going to say more than that, surely. Rather, he will unpack it and help them to grow deeper in their knowledge of it and understand the difference it makes in their lives. In fact, this letter of Romans is essentially doing just that.

But secondly, we need to remember that although they are already Christians, there are still issues, as I mentioned. They weren't getting on well with each other, the Jews and the Gentiles. And in the end, no matter what the issue is, the thing that changes people is always the gospel.

[17 : 26] You see, if we want to encourage people to love more, love each other more as they needed to do, then we show them the love and mercy of Christ in the gospel. If we want people to encourage people to be more generous, then we show them the generosity of God in the gospel.

If we want to encourage people to be more godly, then we show them the enormity of God's grace which forgave their sin in the gospel. In other words, it's the gospel that grips us and motivates us and changes us.

And that's why Paul will preach the gospel even though they know it. That's why we preach the gospel to you every week even though you know it. Because it's the gospel that encourages us and changes us.

You see, we never graduate from the gospel. We are to unpack it and grow deeper in our understanding of it, sure, but we are never to stop hearing it because this is the news that changes everything.

Which brings us to our final point, point three. See, Paul knew that this gospel changes everything. For example, it changes people from being enemies of God to being right with God.

[18:30] This is why he's not ashamed of the gospel. See, verse 16, he says, for I'm not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes, first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.

How does it do this? Well, verse 17, for in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last. Just as it's written in Habakkuk, the righteous will live by faith.

See, Paul knows that God's gospel is news that changes everything for it is God's power to save sinners. How? Well, verse 17 says that the gospel reveals or shows us how to be right with God by having faith in Jesus.

Paul will later explain that if we believe in Jesus, then God simply gives us Jesus' righteousness. He declares, that's it, you're right with God. You believe in Jesus? Done.

You are right with me, you're forgiven. Done and dusted. Can I ask you, do you believe in Jesus? There's no other way to be forgiven, but if you are, then God says, you are right with me.

[19:42] Sin's forgiven. Past, present, future. And that's great news. It's news that changes everything about how we are saved. No longer does it depend on us and what we do, instead it depends on Jesus and what he has done.

You see, for many people like Martin Luther, they were told that being right with God was about doing good works, practicing penance as he had to do, being a good person.

But the problem for Luther was he was never sure that he had done enough good. He says, and I quote from one of his works, he says, but I blameless monk that I was, and he was blameless, in fact he was so zealous to do the right thing that he bugged everyone in his monastery and they asked him to leave.

He went to six worship services a day that began at 2am. He often fasted for three days straight, no food or water, all in an effort to earn his salvation and get right with God. And so he says, a blameless monk that I was, I always felt before God I was a sinner with an extremely troubled conscience.

I couldn't be sure that God was appeased by my works, he says. I constantly badgered St. Paul about that spot in Romans 1.17 and anxiously wanted to know what he meant.

[21:00] I meditated night and day on those words until at last by the mercy of God I paid attention to their context. The righteousness of God is revealed in it as it is written the righteous person lives by faith.

You see, before this he thought the righteousness of God just meant that he got punished because God was right and he was wrong. And then he realised, he says, I began to understand that in this verse the righteousness of God by which a person can live is a gift of God by faith.

And once he realised that he said at once I felt that I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. You see, every religion teaches that we must do something to earn salvation.

We must do something to be right with God. But God's gospel, God's news is that Jesus Christ the Lord has done it all by his death and resurrection. We are to believe, have faith, trust, they all mean the same thing.

We are to trust in Jesus and when we do, God says, great, you're now right with me. And this changes everything. We now have forgiveness for past, present and future sins, which is liberating.

[22:17] We now have assurance of heaven because it no longer depends on how good we are, it depends on Jesus. And so we can be sure of going to heaven and that is incredibly comforting. And we now have life eternal, eternal, which is mind-blowing.

The gospel truly is news that changes everything in our relationship with God. And it ought to also change everything about how we live for him from then on. For starters, if it hasn't already, it ought to change the way we see the gospel.

You see, although we are not obligated to preach the gospel in the same way Paul was, we're certainly not to be ashamed or embarrassed by it, but rather to share it as we have opportunities.

Some years ago, a friend of mine said to his Bible study group that if they prayed regularly for opportunities to share the gospel and didn't get any for a month, then he would give them \$10. This was a few years ago and to this day he hasn't had to shell out a single note. Now, I'm not saying this is a magic formula, but the point is that we can pray, we are to pray, and opportunities do come.

And if the opportunities didn't come, then it was because the people in his group weren't praying. And some of them admitted it was because they didn't actually believe the gospel could save.

[23 : 35] They didn't actually believe that the gospel is God's power to change lives. Do we believe that? If we do, we'll be praying for opportunities to share it. Will we not? Not only ought the gospel change the way we see it, but it ought to change every aspect of our lives if it hasn't already.

You see, this news is about Jesus Christ who is Lord. And so we had to live for Jesus as Lord in every aspect of our lives. We had to have that obedience that comes from faith, verse 5, that seeks to trust and obey Jesus as Lord for that is who he is.

In fact, in verse 1, Paul calls himself a servant of King Jesus, but the word servant is literally the word slave. Paul regards himself as Christ's slave, someone who belongs to Jesus and humbly submits to Jesus.

And it's not just Paul who belongs to Jesus like this. verse 7 suggests all Christians belong to Jesus. Of course, it's not the kind of slavery we often think about for verse 7 says that we are loved by God.

That is, we have a loving God and Lord and so we are to joyfully serve him, always seeking to please him above all others. I was recently reading a book where the person said he was looking at this concept of slavery to Christ and he said a slave of Christ is someone who has an exclusive preoccupation with pleasing Jesus.

[24 : 58] I like that phrase. An exclusive preoccupation with pleasing Jesus. So often my exclusive preoccupation is pleasing myself. But no, no, we are Christ's slave and we are to be preoccupied with pleasing him, actively and joyfully thinking about how we can serve him above all others.

As Paul says in 2 Corinthians, we make it our aim to please him. And let me finish with this story. I was at university and there was a guy called Michael and he became a Christian through the Christian group at university and he was actually enrolled in PE teaching, physical education. He'd always wanted to be a PE teacher. He'd come to university, signed up and then became a Christian in his first year of PE teaching. And he soon realised that it was very hard for him to be a Christian in this course because all his friends, the PE course, the whole year, used to go out and get drunk regularly.

They were sleeping around with each other, that sort of thing. And he realised he had to make a choice. He had to either please his friends and himself and continue doing PE teaching, which he always wanted to do, or he had to please Jesus and get out.

And so he changed courses to environmental science, which he didn't really want to do. It was just the easiest thing to change to. He could have changed university, sure, to do PE teaching somewhere else, but he'd become a Christian there and his support network was there.

[26 : 19] And so he stayed to grow as a Christian and he changed courses, even though he wanted to please Jesus. He was Christ's slave, you see.

He had a preoccupation to serve his master. Now, of course, not many of you here are going through university and it's not exactly relevant, the details of the illustration, but you get the point, don't you?

We've got to be people who actively and joyfully think about how to please Jesus above all others, for he is our loving Lord who gave his life for us that we might be right with him.

Let's pray. Our gracious heavenly Father, we thank you for the news which is the gospel, that Jesus Christ is Lord, that he is the Lord who died and rose again through which we can be given righteousness and be counted right in your sight.

Father, we thank you for this news. We thank you that it does change everything. It changes our relationship with you and it ought to change the way we live solely for our Lord Jesus.

[27 : 29] Father, help us to do this, we pray, not for our sake but for his name's sake. In Jesus' name. Amen.