

Promoting the Gospel - The Command

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] Please be seated. You may like to have open the Bibles at Psalm 96 on page 479.

As I said at the beginning of the service, we're beginning a sermon series today under the title of Promoting the Gospel, and that'll occur for the next seven weeks or so.

Let's pray. God, our Father, we thank you that you've caused Holy Scripture to be written to make us wise for salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ.

We pray today that as we come to your word, you'll write it in our hearts that we may believe it and obey it and give you glory and honour in our lives.

For Jesus' sake we pray. Amen. One of my least favoured jobs of the week is to go to the supermarket and go shopping.

[0 : 58] And I especially hate it when it's full of people, and often I go late at night, and when it's empty of virtually people and things on the shelves sometimes too.

But that doesn't matter too much. But I have discovered that if you pick the time right, it's usually the most crowded time, you can actually have lunch at Coles.

Because there are all sorts of little stalls where they're trying to get you a little sample. And if you walk backwards and forwards enough times and change hats and things, you can actually get quite a reasonable fee. In fact, I've worked out you don't even need to buy anything in the shop.

You can just go in there and try the different samples. And you might get a piece of sausage on a dry biscuit or a bit of cheese or some, what's it called, ya kult or something that looks revolting to me and turns me off.

Or a bit of yoghurt in a little thing or ice cream and even a nice dessert if you're really lucky and strike it on a particularly good day. And all of those promotions usually have people standing there behind them that know very little about the product or a couple of things.

[1 : 58] But they're all trying to promote their product. And usually under the guise of, this is tastier or better for you or better value or nicer or just brand new. And you really should buy this product and eat it.

Or usually it's an eating type product that they've got there. And so on. And every now and again, of course, a product is promoted that really overstates the case.

I'm not sure about in supermarkets, but certainly on television advertisements. You need this product. It will change or revolutionise your life. Only this product will bring you true happiness.

Or only this brand does the job at all. And of course, sometimes there's that confusion of desire and necessity. Probably not in their minds, but to create confusion in ours.

So not just, you know, you want this product, but you actually need it. You can't live without this product. And whenever I hear that sort of thing, I say, well, yes, I can. I don't need that product.

[2 : 59] It actually turns me off, let me say, when I hear that sort of language. Sometimes Christian evangelism has this sort of approach that Christianity will add something significant to your life.

It will add meaning, happiness, joy, peace, satisfaction, those sort of things to your life. It's a life-enhancing product. And sometimes it's at the level of Christianity will do this more than another religious product, if I can put it like that and express it like that.

And there's some validity to that sort of approach. Certainly Jesus does bring all sorts of benefits to our life. Peace and joy and happiness to an extent and meaning and satisfaction and so on.

If this was the only way we promote or speak or recommend the Christian gospel, then in the end I think it comes up short at significant places.

That sort of approach that Christianity, more than another product, will add something to your life, just as if we were promoting breakfast cereal or yogurt or something like that, is a sort of relative approach.

[4 : 20] That is, better than this is this product. Brand new, better job, more tasty, less calories, whatever it is. It's Christianity better packaged than the others.

It will bring you more peace or more satisfaction or more fulfillment than this range of religious products over here. Now there's some validity in that approach as we promote the gospel. But as I think we'll see and as we ought to know, it comes up very short. Simply put, that sort of approach ends up at saying, in effect, well, I prefer Christianity because it delivers these goods and I think it's actually therefore better than this.

But in the end, whether you choose Kellogg's or sanitarium breakfast cereal becomes a sort of matter of preference and taste. And so our gospel declaration and promotion, if it's simply at the level of what added benefit it brings us in our life, sort of collapses into a relativism of, well, I prefer this over that.

But maybe you prefer that over this. Oddly, and by the way, in a sense, it strikes me that we're often more reluctant to promote our faith than we are the latest biscuit or breakfast cereal.

[5 : 42] You know, you think of all the little conversations you have over morning tea or lunch with friends during the week. Oh, did you try that new brand of such and such? Oh, you should try it. It's very nice, very tasty or a good recipe or whatever it is.

And yet somehow we're often silent and dumb about our own Christian faith, which surely is much more significant than the latest brand of breakfast cereal or biscuit or yogurt or whatever.

Is it because we're unconvinced? Is it because we're actually quite relativist and think that, well, whilst we've got the Christian faith, there are all sorts of other ranges and options that are equally valid?

Is it because we lack love for people that we're silent and dumb? Or have we been fooled into thinking that religion still is a taboo subject in our society?

Well, this series of sermons is entitled Promoting the Gospel. And we're beginning today with Psalm 96 because it shows us in an evangelistic way a key theological point, the heart or kernel or foundation, if you like, that sets us going properly.

[6 : 52] Psalm 96 begins three times exhorting the reader, Sing. Sing to the Lord a new song. Sing to the Lord all the earth. Sing to the Lord, bless his name.

Not the only place in the scriptures that exhorts God's people to sing. Three times significant, three times emphatic. Sing.

And not just the people of God to sing, but indeed the whole earth is to sing, which I suspect probably means as much the trees and the oceans and the heavens and the skies and things as it does all the peoples of the earth, which will be singled out a little bit later on.

Of course, for trees and so on, I guess it's using metaphorical language. But in effect, it's saying that God, who later on we're told is the creator of the earth, the whole earth will sing to the Lord and resound his praise.

Why? Well, the second half of verse two is tell of his salvation from day to day. Notice from day to day suggests that we are constantly to be singing to the Lord, not just occasionally, not just on special occasions, not just on ad hoc basis or one-offs or even on Sundays.

[8 : 13] Day by day, singing to the Lord. Here's an exhortation that singing in the shower every morning, I suppose, is not necessarily a bad thing to do.

And because of all the people who will be listening, as we'll see in a few minutes, sing loudly in the shower as well. But no, it's more than that, and it's probably more serious than that. It's that constantly in our life, the telling out of the salvation of God is to be on our lips.

The psalm arises out of an experience of the salvation of God for his people. So singing upwardsly to God is at the same time telling outwardly his salvation day by day.

So two directions are happening at the same time. There's a sense of parallelism in those statements in verse 2. So the upwards direction of singing to God his salvation to us is at the same time singing outwardly to others what God has done for us.

Whom are we telling of his salvation? Verse 3 makes that clear. Declare his glory among the nations, his marvelous works among all the peoples.

[9 : 31] Again, there's a parallelism there. So it's declare God's glory among the nations and declare his marvelous works, which is parallel to glory, among all the peoples.

This is evangelistic hymn singing. That is, we are singing songs or hymns of praise to God that recount his salvation to us, but we're doing it in the earshot of the world.

We're doing it for the benefit of others. If you've ever been to an Arabic country, you'll soon notice, probably before dawn at an ungodly hour of mourning, minarets blasting outside your hotel window what is, usually you can't understand unless you understand Arabic, a call to prayer.

In a sense, it's like an evangelistic call for anyone and everyone will hear these blasts of the minaret. Well, we are in a sense to be singing songs to the Lord, maybe not over megaphones at 4am in the morning, waking up everybody in the neighborhood, but at least in a perhaps a little bit more courteous way, singing out our songs of praise to God in the earshot of the world.

Now, maybe that means that we should as a congregation go and stand in the park and sing our hymns, but maybe it's a little bit more subtle than that. There's a recognition, I think, that even in church congregations, regularly there'll be people who are not sure of their faith or unbelievers.

[11:00] And so actual singing of praise to God and recounting his salvation in song has an evangelistic function like that. But there'll be other occasions as well. For the salvation here in verse 2 and 3 is for the Old Testament people, goes way back to the time of Abraham onwards.

This psalm, if it comes from roughly, let's say, the time of David, would mean recounting the salvation of God when he called Abraham from Mesopotamia, gave him promises of salvation and promises of land and promises of generations to come from him that would be God's chosen people.

And then God backed up those promises faithfully by delivering the people from the slavery in Egypt, bringing them through the Red Sea, through the 40 years in the wilderness, his miraculous provisions for them, and then strongly overcoming the enemies in the land to give them the land, establish Jerusalem as its capital, to give them a king, David, or Saul and then David, and then establish Jerusalem as his temple and in a sense his throne on earth.

They are, in sum, the great acts of God. Part of that act of salvation is to give the law of God to his people. So you could sort of sum up, it's the land, the law, and the liberation that are given to the people of God, all stemming from promises God made to Abraham.

So that would be, for them, the substance of their telling of salvation. For us, that's the first part of it, but it climaxes for us, of course, in the events of Good Friday and Easter, remembered last weekend.

[12:40] Why are we to tell the world of these acts? In particular, for the Old Testament Israelites, why should they sing of the salvation that is particularly theirs to the world?

That is, if God has chosen Israel, the descendants of Abraham, to be his people and set them apart from other nations in the land and with the temple, then why here are they to sing of that salvation but to the rest of the world who are not Israelites, descended from Abraham?

The reason we're given is in verse 4, which begins because, or for, great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. He is to be revered above all gods.

The significance of the connection of being the saved people but singing for the benefit of the world is not a smug boast, we're saved and you're not sort of thing, but is to declare that in saving God's people, God has demonstrated his vast power.

Great is the Lord and greatly to be praised. He is to be revered above all gods. There is a sense in that verse that God is better than other gods.

[14:09] There's a comparative statement. He's more to be revered than all other gods. It's a little bit like having your two products and saying, well, my product, I think, is better than that product.

My product is cheaper or tastier or less calories or more powerful or efficient or whatever than this product. It's a comparative statement in verse 4.

But it's also more than that. It's not saying so much that all these other gods are powerful to this point, but our God's actually a little bit better and therefore we recommend him, Yahweh, the God of Israel, translated with the word Lord in capital letters.

No, you see, verse 5 draws the conclusion. For all the gods of the peoples are idols. But the Lord, Yahweh, made the heavens.

See, it's not simply we've got these powerful gods. Yahweh's a bit more powerful, therefore he wins and we want to encourage people to go for the better God. The contrast is so vast that in the end, in practice, all the other gods are nothing.

[15:20] That's literally what the word idols means. Nothings or worthlessness in effect. It's not a comparison between some powerful gods and a more powerful god.

It's saying in the end, there is no comparison. The God of Israel alone has power. The other gods, so-called, are just idols made by humans that are mere nothings or worthlessness.

There is no comparison. You see, the promotion of God here or the declaration of God's glory is not just our God's better.

He delivers better products. Take your pick and see and I think you'll be convinced. In the end, it's saying there is no choice.

There is only really one God. All the others are made up. They are impotent, powerless, useless, nothings, worthlessness.

[16:25] And that's the bottom line, in effect. That as we are promoting or declaring God, we are, in effect, declaring there's no choice. There is only one God, in effect.

That's the thrust of verses 4 and 5 and it sums up the powerful salvation of God in past history for Israel. For when God brought the people out from Egypt and slavery there with the sequence of 10 plagues, there was really no opposition.

When God brought the people into the land and conquered the land from the Canaanites and all their gods, in the end, there was, in effect, no opposition.

By way of other gods, I mean. And that continues to be the story through the scriptures. That for all the pursuit of other gods and idols, whether it's by the Mesopotamians in Abraham's day, by the Egyptians, or by the Canaanites, or the Assyrians, or the Babylonians, or the Greeks, or the Romans, there's in the end no opposition.

They're idols made by human hands, by the ingenuity of human minds. They're nothing. Only the God of the Bible is the creator God.

[17:42] Only the God of the Bible is powerful. So in a sense, it begins at the level of comparison, more to be revered than is God above all other gods.

But it ends up saying the comparison is so vast, there is nothing to compare God with. He's incomparable, unique. In the end, it becomes a statement of monotheism, of one God.

There are no others. The choice is clear. Verse 6 puts it, Honor and majesty are before him. Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.

Similar words were said in praise of God in the other reading from Revelation 19. In fact, dotted throughout Revelation come statements like this. Power and strength and honor and might belong to God.

The context in Revelation even more clearly than here, but the same here, is in effect saying all strength and all beauty, all majesty, all power belong to God.

[18:44] There's no comparison with any other God. Having begun with a three-fold exhortation to sing, the psalmist now has a three-fold exhortation to ascribe something to God.

Verse 7 and into verse 8, Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength, ascribe to the Lord the glory due to his name.

That is, acknowledge that God has honor and glory, strength and power and so on. And again, it's an evangelistic statement.

It's addressed to the families of the earth. It's an odd expression, families, sorry, families of the peoples in verse 7, rather than just the nations or the peoples.

It probably evokes in particular the promises to Abraham that a number of families would come from him of different nations and people groups. That is, it's an acknowledgement of God's faithfulness, but also it's going back to the purpose of setting up Israel to start with.

[19:51] See, so often we Christians think that the charge to tell the world about God comes out of Jesus' words after his resurrection. Go into all the world and make disciples.

And yes, that's a significant part of our Christian command to be witnesses of God's gospel. But actually the whole purpose of God is consistent in the Old Testament as well.

When God made promises to Abraham that he would establish Israel as God's people, the promise was that through you the nations of the world will be blessed. That is, the saving of God's people in the Old Testament was itself evangelistic for the sake of the rest of the world.

God was never choosing Israel at the exclusion of other nations. It was to choose one people for the sake of the other nations. That's there clearly in the original promises to Abraham in Genesis 12.

And so when the writer of the psalm picks up this odd expression families of the peoples he's probably remembering that promise and its purpose that through the people of God the nations of

the world will be blessed.

[21 : 01] And so this psalm is exhorting the people of God to bring about the fulfillment of that very promise. That is, to proclaim God's saving works to them so that these other people will themselves ascribe to Yahweh their God glory and honor and power.

It's an evangelistic statement ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. It's saying to the Gentiles the pagans the non-believers that our God Yahweh is the one whom you should ascribe glory and strength not your idols and not your gods.

They are worthless. ascribe all that honor and glory to the God of the Bible the one true living God. This psalm is quoted at length in another part of the Old Testament in 1 Chronicles 16.

In that book of 1 Chronicles it's the in that chapter it's the dedication more or less of the temple built by Solomon David's son third king of Israel about 950 BC and in that setting up of the temple clearly at the heart of the temple was the Holy of Holies and a clear demarcation was made between where Jews could go and where non-Jews or Gentiles could go or could not go.

Only Israelites could really offer sacrifices. So when we get to verse 8 at the end and it says remember it's addressing the families of the peoples bring an offering and come into his courts that's a stunning statement because it was prohibited for Gentiles to come into the inner courts of the temple.

[22 : 40] They would be unclean but here is an invitation to do that very thing and this is the psalm that was said at the bringing of the ark into the temple in the time of Solomon.

You see this psalm rightly recognises that though there is a clear hierarchy and demarcation in the setting up of the temple ultimately its purpose is not to keep out the nations of the world but when they are converted and acknowledge and ascribe to the Lord glory and honour and strength they are invited in to make an offering to bring about forgiveness of their sins and to come into his courts and into his presence as well.

It's a very striking statement to make when so often through Israelite history through the Old Testament there was such hostility to the Gentiles for they got it wrong.

They boasted about their privilege of salvation and despised the Gentiles rather than seeing their salvation as being God's way to invite and welcome and win over the Gentiles of the world.

And don't think that this invitation at the end of verse 8 is a low view of God that God just sort of welcomes anyone willy-nilly because verse 8 puts it all in a very clear balance sorry verse 9 worship the Lord in holy splendour tremble before him all the earth.

[24 : 08] On the one hand there to all the earth is to sing in the early verses verse 1 but at the same time to tremble because it balances up a God of utter holiness total perfection and moral purity with a God who saves who shows mercy and invites sinners to his presence.

Here is this Old Testament psalm hanging together two things that saving mercy of God and his utter splendour and holiness where to sing but tremble at the same time.

See it doesn't diminish the gospel by saying God's just a God who's loving and forgiving like a benign sort of Santa Claus type figure. Not at all.

It holds together the essential truths of the character of God his holiness and his mercy rejoicing in that mercy and his salvation but trembling before him and his utter holiness.

Again the issue in this ascribing to God is not a relative one. Our God's a bit better than yours. He's a bit more holy or a bit more merciful. Not at all. See what verse 10 says.

[25 : 28] Say among the nations the Lord is king. See this is not an election campaign. The psalmist is not saying you world out there come and vote for Yahweh as king because he'll be a better king than your God.

It's not that relative in its statement. It is saying there is only one king Yahweh our God. There are no others. This is not a competition.

There is no comparison. In effect there is one king. He's demonstrated that through history by his mighty works of salvation for Israel. So it's not saying choose this king over another.

It's saying this is the only legitimate king. Come to him and submit to his kingship. Yahweh reigns. Other gods don't.

In the New Testament the language is Jesus is Lord. Nobody else is. In effect this is a statement of monotheism again. There is only one God.

[26 : 36] God. And that's the bottom line that both legitimizes and compels us to promote the gospel in the world. In the book called Promoting the Gospel that some of our Bible study groups

are working through at the moment or about to, John Dixon the writer begins with recollecting a conversation he had at a cafe with somebody about the gospel and seeking to win people to be Christians.

And her lady had obviously overheard this conversation from another table and when she got up to leave the cafe she walked over to him and said you are trying to convert the world. How dare you? We dare because God is king. There is no other God. He is the king of the world. There is no other. You see it is morally right to seek to evangelize the world. It's intellectually right, theologically right to do so. We dare because God is the king of all.

It's not just one king over against a whole range of kings and you've got your sort of supermarket shelf to choose from and each choice is legitimate even if some are foolish.

[27 : 51] Not at all. There is in the end one king alone and that's why we promote the gospel to the world. It's not just because of what we get from Jesus.

Not just because of sins forgiven and peace and satisfaction and calm and happiness in our life. It's because there is no other God. There is no other king.

He is to be revered above all gods but in fact all other gods so-called are idols. The same thrust you find in the New Testament as well.

For example when Paul preaches in Athens in Acts 17 he preaches the saving works of God but the coming judgment of God. For that's how verse 10 goes on.

The Lord is king, the world is firmly established, it shall never be moved, he will judge the peoples with equity. Paul makes the same connection from salvation to judgment in Acts 17 when he preaches to Gentiles.

[28 : 54] That is, we evangelize because judgment day is coming and every person will face the judgment throne of God. See God will not just judge those who want to be part of his group and let other gods judge them, they're nothings, they're worthlessness.

He's the judge of all the living and the dead, of all nations, all peoples, all times and periods in history. So it's incumbent on us to tell people, to promote the gospel. How dare you seek to evangelize the world?

We do so for people's good. Because they will face the judgment throne of Jesus Christ one day. Imagine if you're standing by the side of a railway and there's somebody lying on a railway track, the train is coming.

I couldn't get involved and tell them to get off the track. Of course we would. The judge is coming, this psalm tells us. He's coming to judge the world by his right.

He is the king, its creator. It's incumbent on us to promote the gospel. Not just because this is better than that, but because this is true and other options are not.

[30 : 10] let the heavens be glad, let the earth rejoice, let the sea roar and all that fills it, let the field exult and everything in it. Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy before the Lord, for he is coming, he's coming to judge the earth, he'll judge the world with righteousness and the peoples with his truth.

love. No exceptions. This psalm marvelously holds together the saving mercy of God and his utter holiness that will see him by right judge the whole world, all peoples, all nations with righteousness and truth.

And we see the same in the New Testament, the same balance held together with the saving mercy and the utter holiness of God coming together most perfectly on the cross of Christ where wrath and mercy meet.

See this same declaration here is the gospel of Christ crucified. Foolishness to the world but powerful and wise to those who are being saved. We promote the gospel of God because it alone is the power and wisdom to save.

There is no other name by which any person can be saved. So all of God's people are exhorted in this psalm to sing to the world for the world's benefit that they may hear the saving works of God and themselves ascribe to God glory and honor and come before him with trembling.

[31 : 45] Years ago when I lived in England I remembered there was a chap who was training to be a lay preacher and he had a bad start of being a lay preacher let me say because his first sermon in his home church in Cheltenham which was not my church there was a fight broke out in two of the back pews.

Apparently some woman I think had a hat on and the man behind couldn't see and so he told her rudely to take the hat off and that began a fight. That was his first sermon that happened during his sermon.

The second sermon I think it was that he preached was in another church in Cheltenham where I lived and he in this time a man during the sermon had a heart attack and I'm not sure that that's funny but anyway it certainly upset Mark's sermon and they had to call the ambulance and so on and they worked out with the minister or whoever was there where this man lived.

So they went to his house and his wife as it turned out that was an old man was so relieved. Not relieved because he'd had a heart attack but I remember them telling me this story that they were so surprised at her reaction.

Every Sunday morning she thought he had a mistress somewhere. She had no idea where he went on a Sunday morning. Well it's a mind boggling sort of idea and let me warn you that if you're like this and you've got people back in your household who have no idea where you are this psalm makes it incumbent upon us to sing to the Lord to declare his salvation for the sake of the world that they might come and declare and ascribe to God glory and honour as well.

[33 : 29] As verse 3 exhorts us, declare God's glory among the nations, his marvellous works among all peoples. Amen.