

The Power of the Gospel

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[0 : 00] I want to begin our Bible talk for today in a very strange way. You see, for 11 years Heather and I lived across the other side of the country in the wonderful city of Perth and I want to begin by taking you for a little tour of the Perth Metropolitan phone book.

Now I estimate that in the year in which I took this survey there would have been about 1 million people living in Perth and so I did the very interesting and rather incredible exercise of looking for names in the phone book.

It was a day when you had both residential and business names in the same book and so what I did was I looked for people or organisations that had the word power as the first word in their name.

Now did you know that in the mid-90s in Perth you could not only stay at the Powerhouse Boutique Motor Inn you could also go to Power Personnel, Power Shop, Power Tech, Power Dental Studio, the Power Dinghy Racing Club and the Power of One Academy and you could get Power Beer, Power Buggies, Power Tools, Power Exhaust Systems, Power Software Support, Power Sound and Power Peripherals.

And you might engage in all sorts of wonderful activities such as Power Learning, Power Accounting, Power Coaching, Power Management, Power Lifting and Power Cleaning.

[1 : 20] And if you needed help with the various ailments of life or life problems you might go to Solicitor A Power, Power and Jolly Power Chartered Accountants, Father John Power, MJ and JM Power Transport Specialists, Dr Linda Powers the Chiropractor.

And while we're on the phone book, how many entries do you think there are for the name Week? Absolutely none. I want you to notice this point.

There is no weakling's body shop. And in Perth you cannot buy weak beer. There's no weak sound, weak management, weak website design. Friends, I wonder if you can hear what I'm saying. In Perth in the mid-1990s there were many people who did not mind being called Mr. or Mrs. Power or naming their company Power something or other.

But absolutely no one in more than the one million people who wanted their name in the phone book, who lived in Perth, had the courage to call themselves Mr. or Mrs. Weak.

This brief survey of the phone book is incredibly revealing, isn't it? It shows us something very interesting and shows us something very human. For it tells us that we human beings are on a constant quest for power.

[2 : 34] We hate weakness. We hate powerlessness. We cannot stand feeling vulnerable. And for this reason we seek power. We engage in this endless quest for it.

And we seek it in a whole host of places. Some people seek power in their personal experience and seek to build powerful bodies. Now, if you don't believe me that this is the case, you just need to take a drive along Doncaster Road there.

And as you hit Williamson Street over the hill, you need to just, while you're waiting at the red lights, turn right and look and you will see people working on building powerful bodies.

Other people seek power, of course, in society. They seek it in taking positions of power. They seek to make sure they develop relationships that will lead to them taking those positions of power in places such as government, institutions, business, and even in the churches that they belong to.

The nations of our world similarly like power and they seek power often in weapons or in economics. The countries we belong to often want to build and buy bigger and better and more powerful weapons.

[3 : 38] The view perhaps is that the larger the arsenal, the bigger our defence budget, then the more prestige we have and the more other nations will shake in fear of us. Friends, we humans love power.

We seek it in possessions, in status, in money, in titles, degrees, knowledge, relationships. We don't like weakness and insecurity. We like security and power gives us that security.

Power, you see, friends, gives us recognition and gives us influence and that's what we're after. Now let me say, lest you think that we're different, I think we Christians are so much like our society.

You see, we often feel weak and powerless in our Christian lives. Sin masters us. We feel ungifted. We feel unable to express our faith as we would like to. We fail.

We find ourselves fatigued. We don't like it because we don't like weakness and vulnerability. So we seek power. And again, you can see it in the sorts of names we have for Christian organisations and movements.

[4 : 38] For example, not very far from here, you can find the Power to Change Christian Fellowship. And we have organisations such as Power Ministries, Power Healing, Power Evangelism.

We say that our preachers are powerful preachers. We talk about power blocks within our church government. We engage in power politics. You can also see it in all the sorts of interests we as Christians have today.

Increasingly today, we are finding that Christians choose churches on the basis of how exciting and powerful their ministry is. We think, well, we've got to have signs and wonders or we've got to have powerful ministry.

We've got to have exciting and interesting preachers. We must have messages that tell us how we can be powerful, successful and even in today's world, rich as Christians. We think that evangelism is not real evangelism unless it's powerful evangelism.

Or that people won't become Christians unless power is demonstrated through the use of signs and wonders. Because the church growth movement tells us that the goal of any church worth its while is that it is successful and that it can be successful if only it will use the right techniques.

[5 : 49] We are told by many that the goal of Christian ministry is success. Success is only if we have those right techniques. If we build the right buildings. If we put on the right programs.

If we have the right car parks. And others say, no, no, that's not the right way. The way to success is more internal. It's to understand yourself. So you need to go along to this course that will develop you in this area or learn counselling skills in this area.

Attend encouragement courses. Then you'll understand yourself and others and that will make you effective. This will make you a powerful Christian. Others say, well, no, I'm not sure that's right either.

You need this extra experience. Well, if you have this extra experience, then you'll be okay. Everything will be okay in your Christian life. You'll be able to preach the gospel. You'll be able to speak in public.

You'll be able to master this or that sin. And, of course, others of us seek security and status and success in the teachings and practice of one particular preacher or writer.

[6 : 51] Other Christians seek it within secular political processes. Friends, we Christians seek power as much as our secular friends do.

We, too, want security, stability and power. We want it from God. We want God's power. And even some other Christians in the modern church say that we need power to transform society and that Christian faith will be powerful and influential in our society when it transforms our culture.

You can see, can't you, friends, we want power. We want God's power. And we Christians often talk about power. And God himself talks about power.

In fact, God actually promises that he will give power to us. He promises us power. And I want to take you with me to one particular passage where he does it. It's a very important passage and a very important book.

So turn with me, if you could, to the book of Romans. Now, last week, we began looking at chapter 1. We focused on verses 1 to 6. This week, the focus of our attention will be on verses 17 and 18.

[8 : 00] So let me read them to you again. Paul is addressing the Christians in Rome and he says this. Now, friends, I want you to pay close attention to what this passage is saying.

You see, it is telling us that God's power is found in a particular place and that place is the gospel. In fact, you could even put it as Paul does here. God's power is the gospel.

Now, once we have realized that God's power is the gospel, we are faced with another problem. And let me explain. You see, once we've said God's power is the gospel, we need to understand what that gospel is.

And the great news is that Paul helps us here. You see, in this very same chapter in Romans, he tells us what the gospel is. And we looked at it last week. We spent all of last Sunday looking at this particular passage.

But we need to perhaps refresh our minds as to what we saw there. Look again back in the text at Romans 1, 1 to 6. For in verses 1 to 4, he gives a definition of the gospel. And it is one of the clearest definitions of the gospel found in the New Testament.

[9 : 18] Now, before we get down to specifics, I want you to notice something, though, about what it is. And the thing that I want you to notice is this, that the gospel is a message.

The gospel is words. You can see that in verse 1, where our translation translates the word gospel with the words good news. That is, it's content.

It is news of something. You can see in verse 2, which says that the gospel can be written down. And that is, God caused the gospel to be promised long ago through his prophets in where?

The Holy Scriptures in a written form. In other words, the gospel is a message. It is spoken through the prophets. It is written down in the scriptures. It is a message. It is something in words.

Now, please notice what I'm saying. The gospel is words, not an experience. I can write it down on a piece of paper, and I can give it to you, and you can read it, and it is the gospel.

[10 : 17] The gospel is not an experience. Despite what people are increasingly saying today, the gospel is also not social action, not doing justice. The gospel is words about, it is God's words about someone, or God's words about something, and you can write it down and communicate it, and that is exactly what God has done through his apostle in these verses.

Friends, before we go on, I wonder if I can just emphasize this a little more. You see, all around the world today, a number of Bible-believing Christians are making a huge mistake, and Melbourne has quite a lot of them.

They are beginning to say that the gospel includes social justice in its definition. They are beginning to say that the gospel is about social transformation, or social justice, or even ecological transformation.

Or they are saying that social justice is so integral to the gospel that it is actually part of it. Friends, I believe that people who preach the gospel, who believe the gospel, will do deeds of justice.

But good deeds and social justice are not the gospel. Do not be fooled. The gospel is words. It is content. It can be written down.

[11 : 32] So with this in mind, let's take a look at it more closely. Let's look at the content of the gospel. Let me read to you the whole of Romans 1, 1-4. Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called us an apostle and singled out for God's good news, which he promised long ago through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord, who was a descendant of David according to the flesh, who has been declared to be the powerful Son of God by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Holy Spirit.

Now, let's take a closer look at the content of the gospel. What is it? What is gospel content? Well, the first thing to say about it is that it is not about something, but about somebody.

The gospel is content about a particular person. Look at what it says in these verses. The gospel is words about someone who was predicted in the Old Testament, promised long ago through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures, and someone who had two stages of existence.

That first stage is his earthly existence. That is, his existence according to the flesh. And according to the flesh, he was from a long line of Jewish kingly stock. He was born a descendant of David.

He did the work of the Davidic Messiah. He was Jesus the Christ. And then came the resurrection. And through the work of the Holy Spirit, he entered another stage, a sort of alternative existence, if you like.

[12 : 54] And in that existence, he was appointed the Son of God in power. A new era in history began. And in that era, he is Jesus our Lord.

Jesus our reigning king. Jesus Christ our Lord. Or, if you like how perhaps it would be said in Hebrew, Jesus Christ our Yahweh. Jesus Christ our God.

So let's sum up where we've been so far. Paul is saying, so you want power. Well, God has a power for you. And God's power is the gospel.

And that gospel is the word of God about Jesus. The gospel is a message which tells us about his son, Jesus. That brings us to the next question.

Okay, so the gospel is God's power. What is it powerful for? That is, what does this gospel actually do? What does it accomplish? Well, for this, we need to go back to our verses 16 and 17.

[13 : 54] You see, 16 and 17 of chapter 1 of Romans answered this question. And they tell us that God's gospel is God's power for salvation. But of course, that raises another question.

Salvation from what? What is it that this gospel saves us from? Well, Romans 1 verse 19 tells us that. For it tells us that God is angry with humanity. His wrath is revealed from heaven against all godlessness and unrighteousness of people who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

That is, God is angry with his people and it is into that context because of their sin and it is into that context that the gospel comes. And that gospel is God's power which saves us from God's anger or God's wrath.

But that in turn raises yet another question. If the gospel is God's power for salvation, how does it actually do this? How does it save us from the wrath of God?

And these verses contain the answer. God's gospel is powerful to save us for salvation because in it, God's righteousness is revealed.

[15 : 02] Now, this is where things, if you don't think they've got a little bit complicated before now, begin to get even more complicated. This is where we need to do some explanation. You see, the word righteousness is a tricky and difficult word.

And the first thing to say about it is that its use in the New Testament is strongly influenced by the Old Testament. And in the Old Testament, righteousness tends to be relational and concrete.

That is, it has to do more with relationships than morality. That doesn't mean it doesn't have to do with morality, but it is more to do with relationships.

Being righteous in the Old Testament does not fundamentally mean being morally right or correct, though it may include those connotations. Rather, it means being righteous, being right in terms of relationships.

It means being right or righteous with respect to someone else. So what is being said is this. God's power is the gospel. That gospel is powerful to save.

[16 : 02] That gospel saves us because it shows how God has acted in Jesus to bring people into right relationship with himself. Listen to that again. The gospel of God saves us because it shows us how God has acted in Jesus to bring people into right relationship with himself.

Now, when you hear it said that way, it looks as though anyone can be saved because it's all from God. That is, it's God's initiative. God's action is what he has done. And that in turn brings us to the next question.

Well, who is it for then? And it is here that our text comes to our aid and answers our guess with an affirmation. It is for everyone, Jew and Gentile.

Then he puts a qualifier. It's for everyone who believes. Friends, can you hear what I'm saying? The gospel is God's word about Jesus, powerful to save us from God's anger, because it reveals God's saving activity in Jesus, which can bring us into relationship with him.

But it is only for those who accept it. It is only effective for those who accept it. It only wards off that anger of God for those who say yes to it.

[17 : 16] Belief is accepting God's word about his saving activity in his son, in Jesus. So let me now sum up.

The gospel is God's power. It is God's word about Jesus. It is God's word about how through Jesus he brings us into right relationship with himself.

It is God's word about how through Jesus he saves us from his wrath. Well, let's see if we can reduce it to something we can remember. What is the gospel? It is God's powerful word about the worth of Jesus, which rescues us from his wrath.

God's powerful word about the worth of Jesus, who rescues us from his wrath. Better still, rather than remembering that, why don't you just memorize Romans 1, 16, 17, that's what I've done.

It's one of those verses that I allow to seep into my life and my existence. I've done this because I do not want to forget it. So memorize Romans 1, 16 and 17, a great verse.

[18 : 32] Now, for the rest of this talk, I want to go back to where we started, and I want you to remember how we talked about how we Christians are on a search for power. And I want to do three things in the closing moments of our time together.

I want to help you to avoid counterfeit power. And I want to give to you an example how to live with the true gospel. Now, the number and variety of counterfeit sources of power going around today in Christian circles is incredible.

Let me give you just a few. There's that sort of thrust of power evangelism, which tells you that the source of God's power is found in signs and wonders and powerful deeds, in spectacular events, mighty deeds, spiritual demonstrations.

Friends, these things are from God often, and look strong and mighty, and often do great things in God's world. But let me tell you, they're not the gospel.

God's real power is seen in his word about Jesus. If you want to experience God's power, open your life up to the gospel.

[19 : 38] The gospel is the most powerful thing you will ever meet. It leaves signs and wonders for dead. God's power is found in his powerful word about Jesus.

And those who have experienced this power or seen this power at work have experienced or seen the most power God has to give. Now, friends, let me just give you a little bit of an example of this.

When Heather and I were ministering in Perth, we ministered among Chinese people. And there was one postgraduate student there working, doing his doctorate in IT, in artificial intelligence.

And he was a very able guy, and he started coming along to our church, and he began listening. He was brought by a friend. He began to hear the gospel, and he responded to it.

He came to love Jesus. He was saved from God's wrath through God's salvation offered in Jesus. Now, he was for about a year or two without his wife in Perth, and sometime later his wife arrived.

[20 : 50] And when she arrived, she came rushing up to my wife Heather and said, Heather, Heather, please, tell me what you told my husband. He is not the same man anymore.

He has changed, and I want what he has. Friends, there is no one who can tell you more about a person than a spouse. And this woman had seen her spouse, her husband, and she knew that something incredibly powerful had happened in his life.

There had been a change in his life, and she knew its source was the gospel, and she knew she wanted that. God's powerful word about Jesus Christ will change lives, and there is nothing like it for changing lives.

Friends, there is a contemporary Christian power spirituality which tells you that God's power is loosed through techniques of spiritual warfare. No, again, God wages spiritual warfare through the word about Jesus.

It is this word about Jesus which has the power to demolish strongholds, which is the sword of the Spirit, which demolishes the strongholds of evil.

[22 : 08] The preaching of the gospel is the best spiritual warfare you can engage in. Friends, it is the gospel that will convert. It is the word about Jesus that will bring people into the kingdom.

It's the solid preaching of the news about God's saving activity in Jesus that will force people to bow before their maker. Friends, perhaps this is not you. Perhaps you're someone who thinks that being Christian is all about hearing and responding to powerful, charismatic, gifted preachers.

They know God. They can bring you into relationship with God. They know the truth. And again, God says, no, in this passage he tells us it's his word about Jesus that does this, no matter who it is spoken by, no matter how it comes to you.

And that word, let me tell you, friends, is as powerful when you read it to yourself, in your bedroom, at home, as when you listen to it from the mouth of a powerful preacher.

It is God's word about Jesus which accomplishes all this. Do not go in for counterfeits. Paul has told us a deep truth. This is what the gospel is.

[23 : 18] This is what the gospel does. And since these things are true, what would a gospel preacher look like? That is, you know, if the gospel really is this, well, what would gospel preachers look like?

Well, Paul describes them. He describes the gospel preacher in 1 Corinthians 1, verse 18, verses 22 to 25, and in 1 Corinthians 2, and in 2 Corinthians 11, verses 4 to 6.

But the passage I want to read to you is from 1 Corinthians chapter 1, where Paul says, for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to those who are being saved, it's the power of God.

Listen to him. He says, what we are preaching looks stupid, but it is not. It is the power of God. Jews, well, they want miraculous signs.

Greeks look for wisdom. But we, we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews. Foolishness to Gentiles. In other words, Paul's saying, this is something that's got no hope of working in some senses.

[24 : 20] But to those of us who are called, whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Paul says, Christ, the power of God and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength. Friends, let me tell you, that Christianity today in Australia and many places around the world is in a hopeless mess.

There are false teachers in many of our pulpits. There are false gospels that are preached in our churches, in our public places, in our denominations. There are people who are leading our people astray all over the place in these dangers, these days of danger and falsehood.

Therefore, where do we go? What do we do? Well, friends, let me say that our hope for success will not be found in power evangelism, in power growth, in power within, in power preachers, in power leaders, in transformed structures of society or in power politics.

Our only hope is in true power. And true power, God's true power, is found in the hope of the gospel. Friends, I fear that we in Australia have lost our confidence in this gospel.

[25 : 41] Many Christians, I fear, have misplaced God's power because they have lost confidence in the gospel or they're wanting something more personally powerful. Friends, let me plead with you, do not lose confidence in the gospel.

Do not be ashamed of the gospel. Do not think it is not as up-to-date as it should be. Do not think that it is not relevant. It is very relevant, very powerful, and God stakes his reputation on it.

If it does not do what he says it will do, then he is not God. Friends, let me just close our time together by reminding us who we are.

Remember last week, I said I wanted to adopt the term gospel-centered. I've come, gradually, to prefer this term above the term evangelical, which I still use, but I like gospel-centered.

I've come to prefer it because the term evangelical has, I think, lost its cutting edge. Friends, I want us here at Holy Trinity to be gospel-centered, and I believe God wants us to be gospel-centered.

[26 : 49] But I want us to be this, I think God wants us to be this, because this is who we are. We are gospel people. We are not ashamed of the gospel.

No, on the contrary, we are confident in the gospel. We are committed to preaching the gospel. We are committed to preserving the gospel. We are committed to practicing the gospel.

We are gospel people. We are this, because the gospel about Jesus is the center of God's purposes in his world.

and we want to line up with God. We want to line up with God saying what he is saying. So let us pray together.

Father, we are not ashamed of the gospel, for it is your power to salvation for all who believe, for the Jew first and also for the Greek, for in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith.

[27 : 53] as it is written, he who is righteous will live by faith. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.