

Responding toThe Gospel Call

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[0:00] I'm going to turn this evening to the passage read, the book of the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 28, and we can read again at verse 24.

And some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. But some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved.

I'm sure most of you, or many of you at least, are aware that we're approaching a time of the year where many vacant congregations, such as yourselves, some of these congregations, or most of them more advanced, as to looking to fill the vacancy, are anticipating the batch of students that have completed their studies in the seminary.

A seminary being licensed and being available for call. And there are a number of congregations, there are a number of students.

And soon they will be probationers, and soon congregations will fix their interest, interest, or make their interest known. And in due course, they will seek to call them.

[1:43] And now I've been an interim moderator in many congregations over the years, and I have to say that the mindset of a calling congregation is a mystery to me.

Because I have yet to discover what a congregation is actually looking for when they're calling a minister. I think it amounts to something that is as broad as there are people in the congregation.

Now there's many reasons why that should be so. And some of them are valid, and some of them are not. Some of you would ask the question, well, why are you interested in this particular person?

And the answer might be, well, he's got a young family. And, well, that might be important. But is it important in the context of getting a minister who will preach the gospel?

There could be any number of reasons given. Some of them, some of them, some of them much more valid than that one. Some of them less so. Now, when we think about what is necessary for the propagation, for the publication, for the proclamation of the gospel, there are many questions that must come into our thinking.

[3:22] And there are many answers that we would need to seek. And when we look at the scripture examples we have of gospel ministries, they may help us to understand what is critical for a gospel ministry to be successful.

And some of these things we may often overlook. Some of these things we may choose rather to place less emphasis on.

One of the commentators who has written a commentary on the book of Acts has made this man called Lauren.

And in the commentary, I suppose it's not your average commentary, in the commentary, he wants the reader to imagine a congregation looking to call a minister.

Now, in our setting, the congregation sets about calling a minister. But in many congregations and many different setups, the minister may apply to the congregation.

[4 : 47] And in such instances, I think this was what he had in mind, the prospective candidate will present his CV to the calling congregation.

And this man wants us to imagine what such a CV would be like if it was sent by the Apostle Paul. And this is what he said.

I have many qualifications. I've been a preacher with much success and also had some successes as a writer. Some say I'm a good organizer.

I've been a leader most places I've been. I'm over 50 years of age. I have never preached in a place more than three years. In some places I have left town after my work has caused riots and disturbances.

I must admit I have been in jail three or four times, but not because of any real wrongdoing. My health is not good, though I still get a great deal done.

[5 : 54] The churches I have preached in have been small, though located in several large cities. I've not got along too well with religious leaders in towns where I have preached.

In fact, some have threatened me and even attacked me physically. I'm not good at keeping records. I have even been known to forget whom I have baptized.

However, if you can use me, I shall do my best for you. That is an imaginary CV. But there's nothing imaginary about the content of it because if you're familiar with the New Testament, you'll be familiar with most of the things that are said about the Apostle Paul that they feature in that imaginary CV.

He has been all of these things. A good preacher, preaching short term, preaching long term, preaching successfully, in prison, and so on and so forth. What has that got to do with this passage that we're looking at this evening?

Well, the focus of the passage has to do with the focus of Paul's ministry. The focus of the passage is a reminder to us that whatever a minister is or whatever a minister does, essential to that ministry is the gospel that he preaches.

[7 : 26] essential to the success of that gospel, preaching is the emphasis that is placed within that gospel preaching and the passion of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, Paul, you would have to agree, has been a zealous preacher. Paul, you would have to agree, has repeatedly proved that the gospel that he preached has produced results.

And yet, it is true of the same person that not only are there results to be seen, but that there are also those who have not responded to the gospel.

that is before me tonight, a congregation of people who have heard the gospel preached over the years from different preachers.

Some have chosen to hear the preaching and respond to the preaching and believe the preaching. Others have heard the same gospel but have not believed.

[8 : 43] Paul is, we are told here, some were convinced by what he said, but others disbelieved. Now, why would a person such as yourself believe?

Why would a person such as yourself not believe? How would you answer that question? If the same preacher has before him preachers that believe, hearers that believe, and hearers that do not believe, is the fault with the preaching or is the fault to be found with the hearing?

Well, if you look at this passage again, you'll find that Paul has to answer that question for himself. And how he answers it for himself is to look to the scripture of the Old Testament and find in the scripture of the Old Testament something that is true of any and every generation.

And that is that there are those who, under God's word, are described in this way, who will hear but never understand, see but never perceive, perceive, a heart that grows dull, ears that can barely hear, eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, understand with their heart, and turn.

Now it seems a terrible, terrible shame that this is the picture that we have of a certain group of people under the same gospel that has brought life to others, that has brought salvation to others, that the same gospel would not bring life and salvation to them also.

[11:03] So I want us just to think about that this evening. I want us first of all to seek, to discover if there is anything wrong with the message that Paul had to deliver.

If there is anything at all that we can find with the gospel that Paul preached that would leave it defective, that would leave it in a way that some who are under the gospel are incapable because of Paul's delivery or because of Paul's emphasis or whatever that leaves it in some way needing to be readjusted.

If it's not the preacher, well, what about the hearer? What can we discover about the hearer? And the hearer is described to us here.

The hearer is not hearing. The one who's under the gospel but not taking in the gospel. The one who's with God's people but not of God's people.

Why is that so? And the third thing, how can we bring a change that ensures that everyone who's under the gospel would be the beneficiaries of the gospel message?

[12:35] The blessed who are under the gospel message? Well, maybe we can't do that but we can at least address the issue and confront you with why it must happen if it does not happen what the consequences will be.

now we know when we read through Paul's epistles something of the content of his preaching. I don't know if Paul ever preached a three-point sermon in his life.

I don't know if he went to sit in the free church seminary today would he have any idea about any of the methodology of the 21st century as far as sermon preparation or sermon presentation or anything like that.

We can't really find a sermon of Paul's in the scripture. You can't say reading through a passage this is the sermon because Paul sometimes preached for hours on end and all we have is a few verses that describe to us some of the content but at least we can say what some of the content is.

In his first epistle to the Corinthians we'll find there examples of where Paul thought importance or import should be placed.

[14:18] In chapter 2 for example of 1st Corinthians we read there at the very beginning of the chapter I when I came to you brothers did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom for I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.

now Paul is there dealing with a particular situation and he's not he's not deriding oratory or the powers of persuasion but at the same time he is not emphasizing it to the exclusion of what he has to say because it is what he has to say that is more important he has to say something about this person Jesus Christ and his crucifixion that he died on the cross for sinners in chapter one of the same epistle what we read there is again of the same emphasis we preach Christ crucified a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles so his emphasis always in his preaching has to do with this person

Jesus Christ and the means by which God secured salvation through his death on the cross he was persuaded he was convinced he was fixed in his own mind this is what people need to hear they need to hear about this Christ they need to hear about the place that he has in the order of God's thinking in the order of God's way of bringing this world that is dead in sin to himself now we can't overlook that and we can't overemphasize it Paul says elsewhere whoever whoever calls upon his name shall be saved now we can't imagine that the

Paul who labored so many years ago could be translated from that time to our time and that that Paul would deal with our society in the same way that he dealt with the society that he dealt with as an apostle because Paul if anything was adept at addressing the situation that confronted him in the way that that situation needed to be confronted so he says himself when he preached to the Romans he became a Roman he became whatever it was that needed to be true of him he was willing to occupy that space and become that person and deal with that people but something didn't change and that was the message that he had to convey the message of the gospel had to be the same now if the message is always the same if it is essentially the same where does the problem lie the problem that we're seeking to address here that there are two categories of people those who believe the message and those who choose not to believe the message well if you want us a brief interpretation of these words that are quotations from the

Old Testament what you have there presented to you is a willful disobedience to the truth proclaimed a willful disobedience to the truth proclaimed we have to remember that this is not just Paul's opinion this comes from the Old Testament we've already said that but you remember Jesus in his own day in his own ministry he met people that he spoke to he proclaimed the truth to he told them where they stood with regard to God he told them where they needed to come in order to be right with God he told them plainly he told them using parables he told them using illustrations but this is what he said to you it has been given to know the secrets of the kingdom of heaven to them it has not been given to the one who has more will be given he will have an abundance but from the one who has not even what he has will be taken away this is why

[19:53] I speak to them in parables because seeing they do not see hearing they do not hear nor do they understand indeed in their case the prophecy of Isaiah is fulfilled and he quotes the prophecy now is Christ there quoting the same prophecy as Paul using the same situation as Paul to describe this willful disobedience because this willful disobedience is something that they themselves are innocent with regard to that they have no choice but to be in denial of God's truth they have no choice but to refuse God's truth they have no choice but to pretend that what they're hearing they're not hearing that their heart is resistant to it but they have no power over their resistance that wouldn't make sense Jesus describes disobedience he describes lack of fruit fullness if I went out to the street there and looked at the tarmac and I started cursing the tarmac because the tarmac was not yielding fruit of any description that wouldn't make sense because you wouldn't expect that but the thing is that

Christ and Paul expects people under the gospel knowing their need of a savior a savior that God has supplied a savior that God has provided that they would avail themselves of God's provision and yet people don't some don't anyway I do I'm always interested in preaching and preachers and I suppose That's the reason why I'm interested, because I'm a preacher.

I try to preach, and I expect my preaching to improve. I would like to see it improve. I would expect it to show evidence that the preaching is producing results.

But I'm always concerned. When that doesn't happen, who's to blame? Is it the preaching to blame? Is it the preacher to blame?

Something's not right. Something's not happening. The gospel is the same. Christ is the saviour. People who are sinners need saving. And why is the saviour not saving those who are lost?

[22 : 46] Is it his fault? Well, has he not done what he came to do? Paul says he did. He came to the cross to die for sinners. What more is expected of him?

He has given his spirit to ensure that when the gospel is preached, that the ability of the hearer is there, along with the preaching of the word, to hear, to believe, to act upon what they hear.

But as I said, when you look at different generations, you go back to Jesus, his preaching. We don't know what that preaching centered on, how it compares to our preaching, if at all, how it compares to Paul's, if at all.

But I was reading a famous Scots preacher, Thomas Boston. And Boston, in his preaching, perhaps most famous for a word that created a storm in his own day, the marrow of modern divinity.

But in his preaching, he preached with great power to a people who are no different to yourselves, a people who have the same need as yourselves.

[24 : 06] And when you examine how he describes the reason for the lack of response in his own day. And remember, this was a man whose preaching was greatly blessed.

And yet, in examining and considering and coming to conclusions with regard to those who were not blessed, he listed several reasons which I believe are the same the world over in every generation.

This is what he said. First of all, he gave an illustration. He said, one thing that Satan does, he makes people fall asleep.

He lulls them to sleep. So that they become like Felix, who we find in this book of the Acts. And he makes you believe that you have plenty time, that you have enough time.

Then there are the more obvious ones. Perhaps our work keeps us back. Because we are so involved in work. We are so intent on work.

[25 : 24] Whether it's the place of work or the purpose for our working. Whether it's, well, you think about it. Sometimes the cares of the world.

But Jesus, remember, suggested these reasons as well. Boston was through a wholeness, laziness. Holiness not being something that you wanted.

It wasn't all that attractive to you. Perhaps the gospel expects too much of you. You're saying, if I become a believer, then becoming a believer will alter my life, the course of my life.

It will change how I am with people, how people are with me. So you're saying, maybe one day it will get easier.

And one day it won't be as onerous a thing to come to the Lord. Or maybe I'll just leave it till tomorrow. Or the day after. Not today.

[26 : 28] Are there any of these reasons, excuses, whatever you would want to call them, given by Thomas Boston 300 years ago, more, are they any different to the reasons that some of you are giving tonight who do not believe?

I don't think they are. I don't think they change. Just the same way the gospel doesn't change. The reason a person has for not believing the gospel has nothing really to do with the gospel per se.

The reasons are centered in yourself. And you're saying, just like Felix, it's not really convenient for me to believe today. I can be saved if I want to be saved any day.

Well, Paul was there and this is what he said. Some were convinced by what he had to say to them.

And some were not. Paul presented them with the Christ who was the saviour. And the Christ who was the saviour was not their saviour.

[27 : 43] Because whatever. They didn't think they needed him. They didn't think that they wanted him there and then. They didn't think that they could leave what they were to possess in order to come to him or whatever.

How do we change you who are resistant to the gospel to being someone who embraces the gospel?

How do you become someone who understands the burden, the presentation of the gospel places upon you? Sometimes having read various theologians and various books upon the preaching and the role of the preacher and the burden of the preacher.

You see, the struggle the preacher has to go through because they want to see converts.

They want to see men and women come to Christ. They want to see young and old embrace Christ, forsake sin, turn from it, and change lives before them.

[28 : 57] And when that doesn't happen, what do they say? Oh, well, their fault. No, they don't say that. They are burdened, just like these elders are burdened when they don't see converts.

They question, why? Is there something that we should be doing? Is there something that we could be doing? Is there some way that we can bring these people who are outside of Christ to Christ?

And they don't have an answer except one answer. And that is, they must see that the gospel is brought to you in the hope that when the gospel is brought to you, by whichever means, that you hear with ears that are open, that hearts that are not hearts of stone, but hearts that are willing to hear what is true of you and what needs to be true of you before Christ becomes your Savior.

It's interesting. Whatever we need to say is this. God must come at the beginning.

God must enlighten the mind. God must open the eyes. God must open the ears. God must... And you say, well, it's his fault.

[30 : 29] Well, it is and it isn't. Salvation is all of grace. But the person who is under the gospel becomes someone under the obligation.

And you can't escape the obligation by being not under the gospel, by choosing, I mean, this building is here and has been here for a while now. There are people who pass this building and they believe themselves not to be an obligation to the gospel.

That's not right. They know the gospel is preached here and they choose not to be under the sound of the gospel. They'll answer to God for that. And you who are under the gospel, who don't respond to the gospel, you'll answer to God for that.

Brian Edwards has got a book called Grace. Amazing Grace. Amazing Grace. And at the end or somewhere in the book, he has a chapter which is entitled Rejected Grace.

Rejected Grace. And he describes the many who will one day appear before the judgment seat of God. And he says, of all the many who appear that, who appear in that place, no one can hope to tell God that they were close.

[32 : 03] That they were close. Because that's not good enough. Nearly saved is not good enough. You've heard the illustration about the passion.

Children used to ask, what's better, being nearly saved or nearly drowned? And of course, your instinct goes towards the words drowned and saved. But if you're nearly drowned, well, you're okay.

But if you're nearly saved, you've had it. Some people think, well, being under the gospel is the same as that. I was there. I was nearly persuaded.

I was nearly a believer. I was nearly one of them. But being nearly one of them is not something you want to be. And the only way you can change from being where you are tonight, one of these that are described by Paul and described by Jesus in exactly the same way, described by the prophet Isaiah, Isaiah, the same way, your heart closed, your eyes and mind resistant to the truth that says to you, believe in the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

Resist that truth and you will perish. You will be lost. Paul was so convinced about the gospel that he preached. You know what he said. Do you remember when he wrote his epistle to the Galatians?

[33:37] He said this and he not only said it once, he said it twice. If we are an angel from heaven preach, should preach to you a gospel contrary to the gospel that is preached to you, let him be accursed.

any other gospel is no gospel. And Paul was saying this is the gospel. This is the word. You go back to this word here.

From morning till evening he expounded to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and trying to convince them about Jesus from both the law of Moses and from the prophets.

some were convinced but some weren't. Every time it's the same.

Some were convinced some weren't. And if it remains like that to the end of your life and you're in the wrong category, someone was teetering on the brink of conviction.

[34:49] Almost persuaded like another. almost a believer. Almost. Doesn't cut it. Paul knew that. That's why his gospel had to be the same gospel that will ever be preached to the end of time. Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and you shall be saved.

That's the gospel I hope you will hear in this congregation and every congregation throughout our land. Although it is perhaps not so in some places.

What they hear I don't know. But if it is not the gospel it won't save. And if it won't save they will answer as preachers and hearers to the God who has sent his son into the world to be a saviour to sinners.

Let us pray. Thank you very much.