

Grace Revealed

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[0 : 00] If you would take your Bible from the seat in front and turn to Galatians chapter 1, you'll be able to follow along with us today. We're going to be flipping backwards and forwards. It's very nice to see the newly minted Reverend Sean Love sitting over here.

I don't know why it is, but in the office he is called Dr. Love, and I'm not sure I understand what that means. You have to get up very early to beat Sean.

Sean, he's actually wearing my robes this morning, and I want to assure him that all they have is perspiration, and they're at that sort of locker room level right now, so you're welcome to them.

Now, this week you may have seen in the media that the 100-Minute Bible was launched in England. It's a Bible you can read in under two hours.

It's a condensed version for those who, I quote, have neither the time nor inclination to read the original. So you can read the whole Bible in less time than it takes to have a good meal or watch a feature film.

[1 : 14] It's clear that there are just too many words of the Lord, and so it's been reduced to just a few pages, the whole thing into a little track to make it what the publishers call more palatable.

In fact, I quote the publisher who is saying, is it a dumbing down of the Bible? Yes, he says, the Bible is so user unfriendly.

And Jonathan Petrie, the religion writer for The Guardian this week, writes this, In the beginning was the Word, but the Word went on a bit. So a new version of the Bible has to be produced for readers with short attention spans.

The 100-Minute Bible, it's a little like a 20-minute marriage, if you ask me. And the launch of the Bible happened in Canterbury Cathedral, and the guy who's done the work was surrounded by these frescoes and artworks and sculptures, centuries old, all built out of the poetry of the scriptures.

And he said, I promise, he said this without a hint of irony, the poetry has been sacrificed for the sake of clarity. I just thought that was great.

[2 : 31] It would be good to do away with poetry, really, wouldn't it? You know, we wouldn't need a choir anymore, wouldn't need to sing any hymns. I'm joking, of course. I think doing without poetry is a little like having a car with four flat tyres.

You're going to get there, but... Or it's perhaps better, it's like an army without rifles. You know, it's going to make some sort of impact, but not the impact it's supposed to.

Perhaps we should reduce Shakespeare to a couple of limericks. Or perhaps I think we should...

Let's just wait until there's a one-minute Bible, or a ten-second Bible, and then we can get on with what's really important in our lives.

Now, the reason I'm telling you this is because although I am sure the project was well motivated, and it may even help someone somewhere, I think it's a wonderful picture of the consistent and relentless need that you and I have to make God more palatable.

And the way we do that is we take the message of the Gospel and we try and domesticate it. And we substitute what we believe into those parts that most embarrass us.

[3 : 45] And, you know, it's a compulsion we never lose. If you're a new Christian and there are things about the Christian faith that embarrass you, I don't think that goes away.

It may even get stronger. And that is why Paul writes this letter to the Galatians. Last week we had a look at chapter 1, and I remind you of 6 and 7, where the Apostle says, I'm just astonished that you are turning so quickly or deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and turning to a different Gospel.

Not that there is another Gospel, but that there are some who trouble you and want to pervert the Gospel of Christ. They were wanting to modify the Gospel. They were wanting to adapt it from the cross of Jesus Christ into a different Gospel.

And as I said before, you don't have to be a Christian for long to feel this drag in your own life, and you don't have to be in pastoral ministry for long to experience this.

There is a constant undertow. There is a pressure, a demand to come up with a different Gospel, to modify the Gospel, to find a Gospel that's not so honest about our sinfulness, to find a Gospel that might be easier to live with, that somehow takes a greater account of my goodness.

[5 : 08] It doesn't keep reminding me of how much I need Christ. It's a constant pressure in every congregation. And I want you to see that this is what's happened in Galatia.

If you turn over to 5.11 for just a moment. Chapter 5, verse 11, Paul says, Now we're going to come to circumcision in the next chapter, but the point is this, that the Galatians were trying to find a way to take the stumbling block of the cross away.

The offensiveness, literally the scandal of the cross. As you see, at the heart of Christianity is the cross of Jesus Christ, which was and remains deeply offensive, culturally and religiously to the Jews, and deeply offensive to the Greeks, because it puts us in a place where we cannot earn God's approval through all our religious apparatus and observances.

We cannot make up for what we have done or for who we are. And we have to allow God to come in our place in the form of his Son to die and to receive his forgiveness on his terms.

And we desperately want something different. But you see, it is the only thing that is worth glorying in. Just turn over to chapter 6 for a moment in verse 14.

[6 : 42] Listen, far be it from me to glory except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ.

We want a glory in everything but the cross of Jesus Christ, because the cross of Jesus Christ reflects so poorly on our religious achievements and our religious opinions.

And the pressure for conformity is so great that we have an infinite capacity, it seems, to glory in ourselves and to create a different gospel. You could create an industry.

I mean, you can make an industry creating new gospels. I have a friend who's at UBC who told me that he was approached by some representatives of a religion called the Reiki religion. It's not one I'd heard of before.

They asked him if they could test his aura. I've looked it up. The purpose of the Reiki religion is to lower our stress levels. It could be a very good thing.

[7 : 40] By putting us in touch with the life force energy of the universe. So my friend stood there and he had to put his hands like this and some of their leaders would stand there and they said to him that they would test his aura and if he didn't feel anything then it was very clear that he needed Reiki help.

And when they finished, by the way, could they have a donation? Now, one of the gospels that is most in demand today is the gospel which everyone can agree with.

It's a gospel that won't be so divisive. It's a gospel that we could all vote for and will be acceptable by many. It'll be a lowest denominator gospel for sure.

And you come to the book of Galatians and Paul says that's a gospel that's going to give you nothing. And there are all sorts of market-driven gospels. Gospels that make me feel good about myself.

Gospels that take a bigger account of my feelings. One of the most popular ones is the prosperity gospel which demands almost nothing from me but means that God's job is to make me wealthy.

[8 : 51] And the thing that is so easy to miss about the book of Galatians is the very fact of the book of Galatians. It's a whole letter in the New Testament written to Christians about the gospel.

It's not written to those who are not yet Christian. The apostle is writing to churches in Galatia that had already come to believe the gospel because it doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian for.

You may have been a Christian for four minutes or four decades. It doesn't really matter. Your need and my need, our deepest need is met by the gospel of Jesus Christ ongoingly.

We may be stagnant in our Christian lives or making great strides. It doesn't really matter. What we need is the gospel. The gospel isn't just the thing that we start with. If you are struggling with suffering, for example, it is the gospel which you really need.

If you have an overwhelming sense of cynicism and unbelief, it is the gospel that you need. If you have lost joy, if you're sliding back into old sins, whatever it is, you and I need the gospel. [9 : 57] And that's why the apostle is so distressed that these people are turning from the gospel. It's their only hope. Just go back to chapter 1, verse 9, this disturbing verse that we read last week.

Verse 9, As we have said before, so now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to that which you receive, let him be accursed.

You see, there are all sorts of areas in the Christian life where Christians can disagree. Christians disagree on a whole range of things. Happily. Sometimes not so happily.

But the amount of water that is needed for baptism, for example. Or what kind of church government should we have? Or the exact chronology of Jesus' second coming.

These are things that Christians hold fellowship with one another over, even if they have a different view. But when it comes to the gospel, says the apostle Paul, and the tradition of the church, that is not true.

[10 : 58] You cannot have a gospel which is close. Any other gospel, he says, is no gospel at all. And the reason for that is that there's no middle ground when it comes to the cross of Jesus Christ.

I'm either saved by that righteousness poured out in blood in his death or by my own. There's no spectrum. Either God saves me or I save myself.

And I think that's why that verse 7 word, pervert the gospel, is so helpful. You remember last week, we saw it meant to reverse the gospel. It's because, you see, the order of the gospel is so important here.

The gospel begins with the love of God and we love him because he first loved us. It's not that I begin to show interest in God and the things of God and a willingness to do what he would want. I promise to give him my life and as a result, he comes to love me. That's the wrong way around. That is an anti-gospel. The truth is, when we were far off, when we are described in New Testament terms as enemies of God, ungodly, weak, God loved us enough to send his Son into the world to die for us, to stand in our place.

[12 : 14] Without asking, he gives us the forgiveness of our sins and his Holy Spirit. And then he opens our eyes to see how brilliant his Son Jesus Christ is and we go, why didn't I see that in the first place?

But you see, that's the opposite of what the world thinks. The world thinks that God likes good people and doesn't like bad people. And as long as you're comparatively good and as long as you're sincere, you're in.

The gospel says that is the reverse. If we try to draw our acceptance from God by our religious experiences or by our observances or by any recent performance or our sincerity, we will always be in our Christian life radically insecure.

We will always be critical of others and self-defensive because we've perverted the gospel. Because true security and acceptance comes from the cross of Jesus Christ.

Now, I want to come to the passage that was read this morning, verses 10 to 24. And you may have noticed that's the longest introduction I've ever preached from the pulpit here at St. John's. And it is.

[13 : 21] It's a terrible thing, but there it is. And all I can say is that there's no conclusion to the sermon.

So, I hope that makes you feel better. In these verses 10 to 24, the apostle wants us really to get clear about two things. They're very simple things.

And the first is, the gospel is revealed by God. You cannot miss this. Verse 11, I would have you know, brothers and sisters, that the gospel which was preached by me is not man's gospel, literally, is not according to man.

I didn't receive it from man, nor was I taught it. It came through a revelation of Jesus Christ. You know, he says, you heard of my former life in Judaism.

I persecuted the church of God violently, tried to waste it, literally. I advanced in Judaism beyond many of my own age among my people. So extremely zealous was I for the traditions of my fathers.

[14 : 23] Twice here, Paul uses this word, God revealed the gospel to him directly from heaven. You know that he is talking about the day when he was on the road to Damascus.

The amazing thing that he is saying here is, do you know, on that day, I was not spiritually neutral about Jesus. I wasn't out there without religion, looking for a religion.

I didn't think Christianity was the remotest bit attractive. I was firmly ensconced in my own religious tradition. In fact, I was going ahead of most other in that tradition.

And the only thing I thought about Jesus Christ is that I wanted to exterminate his name. I was on my way to Damascus to lay hold of Christians, to put them to death, or at least to be violent with them.

It's very helpful, isn't it? Paul was not what we would call a seeker. He wasn't trying to find his way in with Christianity. He wanted to exterminate this name of Jesus Christ and he was very rudely interrupted.

[15:26] And all Paul's upbringing and all his tradition and all his obedience, what he thought was obedience before God, all his religious fervour, he suddenly discovered, was nothing else than a rejection of Jesus Christ.

Paul thought what he was doing was what God wanted him to do. He was working to establish his own righteousness before God, outstripping everyone around him. And when Christ appeared to him and revealed the gospel to him, he came to see that all he was and that all he'd been working for was wrong.

And so he says to the Galatians, this is not a human invention, this gospel. It's not the kind of gospel that comes from conformity to culture.

You could get a million focus groups together. You'd never come up with a gospel like this. You could have thousands of votes in different church groups, a million committees.

I did not receive it from any human being. I was not taught it by any human being, but it came by revelation from God. And you may be thinking that is complete arrogance.

[16:42] The idea that there should be only one gospel that came by direct revelation from God to the Apostle Paul would be completely unacceptable in most sophisticated settings today.

But I'll tell you, it doesn't seem to bother the Apostle very much. Look down at verse 15. When he who had set me apart before I was born had called me through his grace, was pleased to, there's the word again, reveal his son to me in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles.

I didn't confer with flesh and blood. I didn't go up to Jerusalem to apostles. I went away to Arabia and again I returned to Damascus. This is a beautiful section.

Paul is saying what many of the other Bible writers say, that before this world was created, God had a purpose for you and for me.

And when we hear him call us by name through the gospel, we also begin to come to see what is the life work that God has chosen for us to do.

[17:48] And it doesn't really matter what stage of life you're in, how young or how old you are, all that you are and all that has happened to you is God's way of preparing you to serve him now.

For Paul, it was a unique and exceptional calling. He was set apart from other human beings as an apostle to receive this direct revelation from God to proclaim the gospel to the Gentiles.

And he doesn't go to a seminary and he doesn't go down to a church board to see if his gospel was kosher. From the very beginning, he begins to preach and proclaim in the face of great hostility.

Do you remember he was on his way to Damascus to arrest Christians? And we read that he begins preaching as soon as his eyes are opened in Damascus, he begins preaching Jesus Christ and then he is under threat of death and we read here that he then goes away for three years to Arabia and only after that does he go back to Jerusalem, only for a couple of weeks, then he's off again for 14 years and then he brings his gospel to the apostles.

And this is one of those tantalising moments in the Bible where we don't really know what happened in those three years when he went to Arabia. Dr. Luke does not cover it in the book of Acts and people have stitched together all sorts of theories about what Paul did through various references in his letters.

[19:28] The theory I was taught as a child was that Paul went on a three year sabbatical which sounds very attractive to me. He went away for quiet and solitude so that he could get the gospel straight.

This is what I've always been taught. I've now discovered that's a romantic theory that comes from 19th century England of all places. It's far more likely that he went to Arabia to preach the gospel. In Acts 9 when he's converted after Ananias visits with him it says immediately Luke said immediately he preached Christ that he was the son of God.

He's absolutely clear about the gospel from the start and he declares the gospel to all. However the simple point for us is this if God did reveal the gospel to the apostle Paul then if you want to truly know God you and I must go to the gospel.

We don't go to our own private experiences we don't go to special leaders we go to the apostolic gospel received by Paul proclaimed among the nations.

[20 : 42] Here is the rock on which God builds and you'll forgive me for saying this clearly but your experiences and your feelings and your sense of what God is telling you mean absolutely nothing apart from the gospel.

even if an angel came down from heaven let me put it this way there's a minister in New York who says it this way he says if an angel comes into church on Sunday morning and says I would like to preach the gospel it would be impressive wouldn't it?

Keller says what we should do is we should ask the angel what he believes about the cross of Jesus Christ and if the angel reverses the order we should pick him up and throw him out.

I think he's right and I think you ought to do the same for any clergy to get the order wrong as well however that's my first point the gospel is revealed by God I want very briefly to just tell you the second thing here in this passage and it's this that not it's not just that God reveals the gospel but God reveals his approval in the gospel let me say that a different way the gospel reveals our true freedom I can only give you a trailer this is a huge issue in the book of Galatians when we come to chapter 5 Paul says for freedom Christ has set us free stand fast therefore and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery the reason freedom is such a big deal is because in the cross of Jesus Christ God sets us free he sets us free from the need to justify ourselves he sets us free from the tyranny of our own desires free for a life of the spirit freedom to bear one another's burdens and here in chapter one we have just a glimpse of this freedom in verse 10 am I now seeking the favour of men or of

God am I still trying to please men if I were still pleasing men I should not be a servant of Christ part of the essential freedom of the gospel is the freedom from the approval of others the cross of Jesus Christ liberates us from the crushing need and demand we have to please others instead of pleasing others we seek to serve them by serving Jesus Christ now I think this is a wonderfully deep thing and I wonder if we ever begin to grasp this I speak particularly as an ordained minister you may think that the ministry is a wonderful place to go if you're a people pleaser I want to tell you the opposite is exactly the truth because it is absolutely impossible to glorify the cross of Jesus Christ and at the same time seek the approval of other people you just can't do it you see it's the cross of

[23 : 50] Jesus Christ that teaches us that we are ungodly by nature slaves of sin children of wrath that all human wisdom and righteousness and strength is nothing but the tower of Babel there's nothing in us that deserves God's love we receive his forgiveness by sheer grace that is not the way to win God's approval that is not a good self-affirming tolerant message and so we have to modify it one of the sure marks of a false teacher one of the sure marks that the gospel is being perverted is that it will flatter you when you hear it it will be of human origin it will be plausible and pleasant it will have no sharp words for our sin it will deal with your sin by making you feel good about it and the problem for the Galatians was the sin of man pleasing that's an old phrase for the approval of others being afraid of what other people think of you and this is the reason for the constant undertow in my heart and in your heart and in all the churches to modify the gospel very interesting isn't it that Paul speaks about winning the approval of men or the approval of

God in the context of disagreement and conflict that is because the most dangerous thing in conflict and the one thing that the gospel can remove is the fear of men do you know the apostle tried to go out of his way to not offend people in fact he was accused of being a people pleaser he says in 1 Corinthians do everything to the glory of God give no offense to Jews or Greeks or to the church of God just as I try to please all men in everything I do the apostle does not like conflict but neither will he avoid it if the gospel is at stake and here is the problem in conflict there are some people who love conflict and there are some people who will go a million miles to avoid conflict but both do so for exactly the same reason because of what other people think the person who is aggressive and combative and confrontational and has to win does so for the approval of other people and the person who will never upset anybody else does so for the approval of other people and if we are going to serve Jesus

Christ it means we can't avoid conflict nor can we love conflict but we love Jesus Christ and we seek to love one another and this is freedom it means that there is one person in all the universe whose opinion matters more than any other to me and to you and that is the person who loved me and who died for me even my Lord Jesus Christ and therefore we do not need to fear what others say and think let's kneel and pray goodbye you you have a s■ controversial then what youngulo who and value in allources influencers may amazing