

The Advance of the Gospel

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[0 : 00] If you're new with us today, it's our custom at this point to take open the Bibles and look to, we're going to look in Philippians today on page 185 and we have been working through this letter from the Apostle Paul to the church at Philippi, page 185 near the back and as we've moved through the letter I've become increasingly conscious of all the things that we've left out as we've gone along.

There are some tremendous themes in this letter that we haven't had time to look at and so over the next four weeks leading up to Easter we're going to try and touch on some of the major themes leading up to that great statement in chapter 3 where the Apostle says, I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection.

And today the theme that we are looking at is the theme of the Gospel in Philippians. And if this is your first time in church you will discover that Christians talk a great deal about the Gospel, the good news that lies at the heart of our faith.

And it's not because there's so much bad news around, although there is, nor is it because we're terminally positive and we're slightly out of touch with reality. But it is because we believe that in the Gospel we have every blessing that God gives to us.

In the Gospel we have life, we have the forgiveness of our sins, we have freedom from death, we have the hope of glory. And through the Gospel God has made us into new people and is remaking us and will take us to be with him in heaven.

[1 : 39] And there's nothing more we would like you to hear than the Gospel. There's nothing more we like hearing than the Gospel. It's the centre of Jesus' preaching, it's the centre of the Scriptures, it's the centre of our faith.

And in the book of Philippians, nine times the Apostle speaks about the Gospel and he does it without really explaining it because it has a deep history within the Old Testament.

And the word in the Old Testament indicates a joyful celebration of good tidings. Do you remember in the book of Isaiah how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of him who brings good tidings? Your preachers have good feet. Who publishes peace, that was a joke, who brings good tidings of good. And it's no surprise that when the Gospel of Mark opens and Jesus is introduced, we read these words, Jesus came into Galilee preaching the Gospel of God, saying, the time is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand, repent and believe in the Gospel.

So I need to say two very lengthy things by way of introduction. This will be the longest introduction before we get to Philippians that I have ever made. But it's important. And the first thing I need to say is this, that the Gospel is the Gospel of God.

[3 : 04] And what that means is that it is not about you and me. It is about God and what he has done. And I know it's hard to accept that we might not be the centre of something, but the centre of the Gospel is not you and me, it's not humanity.

It is about what God has done in the life and the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ for our massive and undeserved and eternal benefit, absolutely.

And what God has done there has consequences for each one of us, whether we know it or not. But in the first instance, it is the Gospel of God. It's not about us. He is its author, he is its owner, and it has a fixed and definite shape, which although it is expressed in a number of different ways in the New Testament, it's not one thing today and a different thing tomorrow.

It's not a vague message of good news, but it is revealed by God. And there is something which is the Gospel and something which is not the Gospel. It's very important because you hear people talking about the Gospel as though it is the message of universal love and the brotherhood and the sisterhood of all humankind.

But it is not. It is not a vague message of goodwill. It's not an invitation to consider the claims of Christ. It's not calling on us to lead a better life.

[4 : 23] It's not soothing words to help us at time of political extremity. It's not a general raising of the morale. It's not a nebulous message about God's love.

It is the declaration of God's saving grace in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is preaching Christ. And I want to show you this from two places. If you would keep your finger in Philippians and turn back in the Bible to 1 Corinthians for just a moment.

On page 166. And I wonder if you would read with me, please, 1 Corinthians 15, verses 1 to 5. Together. Now, I would remind you, brethren, in what terms I preach to you the Gospel. through the entrance of the that he was raised on the third day for the Lord's disciples, that he appeared to Jesus, and that he appeared to God.

Thank you. So there is the Gospel. You see in verse 3 there are four that phrases. That Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared.

[6 : 00] And the focus of the Gospel, the heart and the centre of the Gospel is the person of Jesus Christ. Not his miracles and not his teaching, but the person of Jesus Christ.

And please, did you notice that we're not just given the facts, we're given the interpretation of the facts. The Gospel is the facts plus the interpretation which comes from the mind of God.

So if you take the first phrase, Christ died, any historian from the Roman times can tell you Christ died. But no historian can tell you that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures.

Let me show you this in another passage. Let's go back to Philippians in chapter 2. Page 185. This is such a good passage.

Let's read verses 5 to 11 together again. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not account equality with God, a thing to be grasped.

[7 : 11] ■ the Lord, bu'clock 0 to 5, as we hear the language from his son, Thank you.

Again, the heart and centre of the Gospel is the person of Jesus Christ. If I'm not talking about Jesus Christ, I'm not talking about the Gospel. And his death is not just a historical event.

His death is a massive act of self-humiliation where he gives his life for us. He comes down from heaven as the eternal Son of God to give his life for us. And the resurrection is God raising him up to sit at his right hand and giving him rule and calling on every person who has ever lived to bow their knees to Jesus Christ and to confess him Lord of all.

When Christians talk about the resurrection, it's not so much life after death. The resurrection is the action of God placing Jesus at the highest position from where he will come to judge the living and the dead.

And when he comes again, he will not come as a man in weakness. He will come as King of kings and Lord of lords. And that is why the Gospel is not just an invitation.

[8 : 45] It is a declaration and a summons from God. It is a command from God that we must bow before the one whom he has placed at his right hand, who loves us so much he gave his life for us and offers us the forgiveness of our sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit.

That is why whenever the Gospel is referred to in the New Testament, there is an exuberance about it. It's sometimes called the Gospel of the Lord Jesus or the Gospel of the glory of the blessed God, the Gospel of his Son, the Gospel of the glory of Christ.

It's the glory of Christ. It's about how God in his remarkable, unbelievable love should act on our behalf when we couldn't care less for our salvation by giving his Son to die for us and to rise for us, to bring us to glory.

This is the Gospel of God and it is a sacred trust and we are to guard it with our lives. That's the first point. The second point simply follows and that is if the Gospel is the Gospel of God, it is also the power of God for salvation.

It is not a human opinion. It is not just human words. But through the Gospel, the New Testament tells us, through the proclamation of the Gospel, God saves us.

[10 : 09] That is why the Gospel is called the power of God for salvation. It is not just us speaking. But as we proclaim, God actively draws us to himself.

Because in the proclamation, the reality of salvation is held out to us by God. And did you notice when we sang that last hymn, and sometimes in the New Testament, when the writers speak about

the Gospel, they speak about it almost as if it is a person.

When Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, he doesn't say to them, we came to you bringing the Gospel. He says, our Gospel came to you. And then he says, after we left, the Gospel was still there, and like a mighty runner, it ran around all of Asia Minor, bearing fruit.

And the Gospel, you see, is not a magical incantation that we control. It's the power of God. It's the way the power of God enters our life and remakes us, creating us as new men and new women in the image of Jesus Christ, drawing us into the community of God's people.

As the Gospel is spoken, and when we use the word preached and proclaimed in the New Testament, they're not really thinking about this. They're thinking about one-to-one and in small groups.

[11 : 29] And when we speak the Gospel, the Holy Spirit accompanies the speaking of the Gospel with a miracle of his own, so that our eyes are open and we see the glory of the person of Jesus Christ, and we want to turn to him and place our faith in him.

It's through the preaching of the Gospel that we are convicted of our sins. It's through the preaching of the Gospel that we are ongoingly given the forgiveness of our sins, brought into fellowship with the living God.

It's through the proclamation of the Gospel that the Holy Spirit enters our hearts and loosens the bond of Satan and sin and death itself. That is why the Gospel is not just what we begin with in the Christian life and then we go on to much greater things.

The Gospel is the way that we begin and it's the way that we continue and it's the way that we finish. That's why the world hates the Gospel. And there is a constant pressure both inside and outside the church to change the Gospel because it addresses us as sinful men and sinful women in need of salvation.

And it says to us, you are not God. You are not master of your own destiny. We do not like being told that we are lost and answerable to God.

[12 : 40] We don't like being told that God himself has provided for our salvation through Christ. But you see, that is also why for those who believe the Gospel it is the source of deepest joy and amazement that God should love you and me so much that he should send his Son to die for us when we deserve the absolute opposite.

I found a lovely quote this week from 1534. William Tyndale, who translated the New Testament into English for the first time. And after he had translated, he says this, the Gospel is, and I quote, good, merry, glad, and joyful tidings that maketh a man's heart glad and maketh him sing, dance, and leap for joy.

Isn't that lovely? And that's why we wear robes. So we can do those sorts of things without people seeing. So the Gospel is God's and the Gospel is the power of God.

Now let's come to Philippians and my third point is this, that the Gospel is worth living for and dying for. There is one central command in the entire letter to the Philippians and it is in chapter 1, verse 27.

Only, which means here is the biggest thing, only let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of God, of the Gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you, that you stand firm in one spirit with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel.

[14 : 21] Live a life, the Apostles, this is the reason he writes, I want you to live a life worthy of the Gospel, so that the Gospel is not just something to believe, it's something to obey.

It's not just theology, it's something that's meant to affect the decisions that we make day by day. It is the power and pattern of our lives. Christian life is very simple.

Live a life worthy of the Gospel. We are to be shaped and moulded by the message of the cross. Everything we do, every circumstance we are to see in the light of the Gospel.

This is what chapter 1 is really about. The Apostle is in prison in Rome, chained between two guards, looking possibly at death. There are a number of so-called Christian leaders circling around Rome who would only be too glad to help sentence him to death.

And we read in verse 12, I want you to know, brothers and sisters, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the Gospel, so that it became known throughout the whole Praetorian Guard to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ.

[15 : 26] And most of the brothers and sisters have been made confident in the Lord because of my imprisonment and are much more bold to speak the Word of God without fear. Isn't that remarkable? I mean, here he is in genuine suffering, looking at true bodily harm.

And what overrides every consideration for the Apostle is not his personal comfort and security, but the advance, the progress, of the Gospel.

It's not that the Gospel will progress in spite of adversity. He says, actually, in and through the adversity, the Gospel is moving ahead. This is very important. The Apostle measures his life not in terms of his career, not in terms of his personal deliverance, not in terms of his personal influence, but in terms of the effect of the Gospel.

Is this not very searching? I mean, do we measure our lives by how what we do affects the progress of the Gospel? I mean, when we make decisions and when we take actions, do we do it on the basis of whether our lives will further prosper the Gospel or hinder the Gospel?

I mean, when we look at events surrounding us, both locally and internationally, do we understand the significance and pray for the significance in terms of the progress of the Gospel?

[16:57] Are we willing to suffer for the advance of the Gospel? You see, the Gospel is very dear to the heart of God and it will be very dear to every person who wants to be like God.

It will affect the way we measure our life and our relationships and our families and our successes and our failures. It will affect the way that we measure emotional events and although we may not be able to see, to live a life worthy of the Gospel means that we are looking for and praying for and hoping for this great thing, the progress and the advance of the Gospel.

That's what it means to live a life worthy of the Gospel. And it's very interesting when you look at what the Apostle says, the evidence he gives for the progress of the Gospel, it's a bit of a surprise really.

It has nothing to do with numerical growth. He says, yes, the whole Praetorian guard has come to know that I'm here for Christ but the thing that he focuses on in verse 14 is that the Gospel has made progress within the Christian community.

Instead of being frightened and intimidated because the Apostle is imprisoned, his imprisonment has encouraged them to be more bold with their witness. Boldness.

[18:14] Do you remember in the Acts of the Apostles when the Apostles have been preaching Christ and they first get into trouble in Jerusalem and they're rounded up and they're arrested and the authorities threaten them and then they let them go and the Apostles go back and they meet with the other Christians and they pray.

Do you remember what they pray for? They do not pray for protection, they do not pray for safety, they pray for boldness. I quote, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to thy servants to speak thy word with boldness.

That's what Gospel progress looks like in our lives. Turn back to verse 27 again. He says, I want to hear that you stand firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel, not frightened in any way by your opponents.

Ever since the church was created by the Gospel, it has been in a tussle for the faith of the Gospel. It is an essential part of the Christian life that we join that struggle.

Every New Testament book speaks about the stand and the fight and the battle for the Gospel. When the Gospel is attacked both inside and outside the church. And what is vital for us to see is not just that there is a fight for the Gospel going on, but that we make it our own.

[19:34] You cannot live worthily of the Gospel unless you are willing to stand side by side with other believers for the Gospel. And each of us needs to decide whether we're willing to suffer for that Gospel.

And don't get me wrong, the purpose of contending and defending the Gospel is not to defeat people or conquer people. It is to protect the Gospel in such a way that it will continue to advance and grow.

And that is why our decisions, both individually and as a church, must be made for the preservation and progress of the Gospel. If there's anything in my life or there's anything in the life of the congregation that impedes the growth of the Gospel, we as a body are to stand against it. because the Gospel remains today the Gospel of God. God's love hasn't changed, His grace has not changed, our need for forgiveness has not changed.

The death of Jesus Christ is still the door to eternal life. He still remains at the right hand of God from whence He will come to judge the living and the dead. And God's call goes out afresh to us today to bow to Jesus Christ, to confess Him as our Saviour and Lord, to come to Him, to know Him, to serve Him, to proclaim Him.

[20 : 49] And so I ask you as I finish, as I ask myself, will you give yourself to the progress of this Gospel? Will you pray that we will have boldness to speak the Gospel, clarity to measure our lives by the Gospel, courage to contend side by side with one another for the faith of the Gospel, and so live a life worthy of this great, overwhelming and joyful good tidings, not for our own sake only, nor just for the sake of those we love, but for the glory and praise of Jesus Christ who gave Himself for us.

Amen.