

The Promised Promise

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Preacher: Harry Robinson

[0 : 00] words in these three weeks, and the word that I want to get at today is the word that this gospel of God is something which God has promised.

And I want you to look at what it means that God has promised this, and to try and get your mind around the implications of that promise.

Yes, the gospel, as we spoke about last week, is the good tidings. And it comes to you, I think, it's the central thing.

I mean, the Bible is full of all sorts of practical advice. It's full of wisdom and devotional statements and so on.

But at the heart of it all is this gospel. And the gospel is the thing that I'm trying to help us get hold of so that we can understand the place that it has in our midst.

[1 : 13] Last week I spoke about Paul who was set apart for the gospel, a man whose whole life was given to this work.

But when you talk about the gospel, one of the peculiar statements of chapter 1 and verse 1 of Romans is that it's called the gospel of God.

And if you look through the New Testament, you'll see that the gospel, this good news of God, is intended for the whole world.

And you will know from having read avidly about Voyager trekking out through space and finding the last of the planet Saturn, dead and cold, but very interesting.

You will, they said, one of the things it must remind us of is that the world is a very unique place. It's unique in the whole of the solar system. It's unique as far as we know.

[2 : 24] They sent out this little record to sing some songs and convey something of our culture to somebody out in outer space if there's anybody out there. But they said the impression you get is the uniqueness of what has happened on earth.

And when Paul speaks about the gospel, he says that this gospel is intended for the whole world. Every culture and every language and every nation in the whole of our world is that the gospel is the good news about God is intended for them.

Now, that's very controversial because God should just deal with his own and that's not everybody. But Paul says it is everybody and that that's what he's out to do. When you think of the globe as the global village, then in a sense the center of worship of the global village is given to us through the gospel of God, which Paul is conveying to us here.

The gospel is a hope when all hope is lost. That's the character of it. The gospel is not words only, as you might suspect from listening to me drivel on, but the gospel is the power of God and the work of the Holy Spirit.

The fact that it is the gospel of God, God is not blind, arbitrary, and vengeful. It was quite a discovery in the whole history of mankind that there was good news about God because men in their foreboding and in their superstition and their darkness probing after God had decided that he was probably quite vengeful, quite arbitrary, and quite capable of destroying things.

[4 : 20] And so they tended to characterize him in that way and that there wasn't anything good about him except that he was to be obeyed at your peril. And then it talks again about that the gospel is the means by which God calls you.

It's the means by which God makes contact with you. You might prefer that he would do it through a sunset, through a mountain, through a transcendental experience of some kind, but God makes contact with us in the same way that the Voyager hopes to make contact with other civilizations through the little record which they've put on board the spaceship.

God has chosen to make contact with us through the good tidings, through this gospel. The gospel further is something that once you know it, you are prepared to suffer for it, as many in the New Testament did and as many have since done.

And the reason that you have to suffer for the gospel is because it comes from God. It's not capable of being compromised. In other words, you can't fit it into any human scheme.

And everybody would like to claim it and to fit it into their scheme, but it can't be fitted in. And so it must not be compromised. And the reading in Chuck Colson's book last night about how this tremendous effort was made to compromise the gospel with the Nazi party in the 30s in Germany and how many church people went along with it, not recognizing that it cannot be compromised and Christians have to suffer in order that such compromises don't take place.

[6 : 16] It demonstrates the power of God. It is that which Paul says we need not be ashamed of. Though I must say that in our super sophisticated, socially and intellectually sophisticated world, I sometimes feel embarrassed by the simplicity of the gospel and wished it was a little more intellectually sophisticated than it is sometimes.

But Paul says, I am not ashamed of it. And I think we have to be careful not to be ashamed of the gospel. Paul goes on to say that it is the power of God for salvation.

You see, the thing that it does is that it's the means by which God chooses to bring us in relationship to himself. It's the means by which God chooses to save us.

Well, the problem with that, of course, is in our society, who needs to be saved? You know, the possibility that you need to be saved probably doesn't occur to you.

And I just pray for you that God may grant you the place where you know that you do need to be saved. But until you do, you might find it rather embarrassing that God has set out to do what you don't think needs doing.

[7 : 38] Well, that's how the gospel works. Now, one way I'd like to illustrate the gospel is with this illustration here, which is not an apple tree, but it's the mushroom bomb.

You know, it's the hydrogen bomb. You have to think of it in those terms. It's like a kind of Hiroshima bomb, which God has dropped on this planet.

Only it is a bomb that brings life, not death. The fallout from this bomb brings healing, not disease.

This bomb builds a city. It doesn't destroy it. And its radioactivity has a half-life longer than all time.

I threw in that half-life bit because I have no idea what it means, but scientists always talk about half-life, so I've got to throw that in. A friend of mine is just starting out to do doctoral studies at SFU in computer science and artificial intelligence.

[8 : 50] And he and his wife have become Christians in just the past few years. And he's very anxious that his life not get compartmentalized into the scientific dimension of it and the spiritual dimension of it.

In other words, how do you, in the graduate school at SFU, studying artificial intelligence, maintain that Jesus is Lord in your life? And he said, in the times past, I found the best way to maintain it is to turn your back on people and just study things.

But I can no longer do that, he says. And so he's involved in the experiment of how you do it. Well, what happens in this situation is that Paul is set apart.

In effect, the bomb hits his life. And I want you to see this. He's set apart in a special way that, do you remember reading the story of how during the war, the Americans, knowing that the other side were about to produce some kind of nuclear bomb, they managed to get hold by daring and various other ways of a whole collection of nuclear scientists.

And they took them away to some conference center, virtually put them in a concentration camp, that is, a camp where they were to concentrate. And they were to concentrate on producing a nuclear bomb.

[10 : 28] And they were set apart for that. And in spite of the fact that they didn't get along very well with one another, and there were a lot of cantankerous personalities, they were set apart to do that.

Now, when you come across St. Paul, you find that he is set apart to do this particular task. He was set apart by God, who confronted him on the road to Damascus, and in a sense dropped the bomb.

I mean, you may not be impressed by this, but there is a kind of interesting thing, that a light above the likeness of the sun hit him. He was thrown to the ground.

He was blinded. And he was led away by somebody blind. That's how it hit him. He was set apart by God. In the same way that those nuclear scientists were set apart to do a particular thing, God chose this uniquely qualified man and set him apart for the gospel.

And if you look at the New Testament, you'll see half of it is written by this man who was set apart to make available to us, through the study of the scriptures, the knowledge of the good news about God.

[11 : 43] So that's how Paul was set apart. He was, and just let me remind you again, he says that he was set apart from his mother's womb, that God was working on him long before he came to the awareness of who God was or what the gospel was.

And in the same way, God may very well be at work in your lives or in the lives of people you know long before they are aware of it. He studied under Gamaliel, was brought up in Jerusalem.

He spoke Greek, Latin, and Hebrew. He was of the tribe of Benjamin. The lovely coincidence that the first king of Israel was Saul, and he was of the tribe of Benjamin.

And now this leader of the New Covenant people, St. Paul, was of the tribe of Benjamin and by the same name. He was, in a sense, the first of the apostles in one particular sense.

He was a Roman citizen, a tent maker, a Pharisee, a persecutor of the church. When he stood before Agrippa, he described the whole of his life as he stood there in chains and said, I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers.

[13 : 00] You see that? I stand here on trial for hope in the promise made by God to our fathers. That's how he explained himself. He was burning with zeal.

He was lusting for the blood. He was burning with zeal. He was burning with zeal. He was burning with zeal. He was burning with zeal. When the bomb fell and he was struck down.

Now, the reason I tell you that, and would like to, in a sense, emphasize the dramatic nature of it, is that when that happened to him, when he was, in a sense, confronted in that way, It was a powerful experience.

I mean, to be converted in that very dramatic way. Stopped as he was on the road in company with others to persecute Christians.

And suddenly he was hit in this remarkable way. He was struck blind and led into Damascus. Instead of the terror of the Christian community there, he was led in by the hand of a blind man.

[14 : 15] It's a powerful picture. Well, the reason I want you to sort of be aware of that picture is because he then began to inquire why it had happened.

Now, Bishop John Reed, who's from Sydney, Australia, was speaking about the problem of experiential Christianity. And he says, a Christianity which makes its appeal on the basis of experience rather than on the careful understanding of the scripture will not last.

In other words, Paul could not go around and say, I was on the road and I was hit and I was blinded and somebody must have done it and it was God.

And so I'm telling you, you better do what he tells you. Or it could happen to you. You cannot take an experience to an individual and in a sense parlay that experience into something which happens to everybody.

You have to take that experience and you have to research it and see where it came from. See what it means. And so having been thumped by this experience, the bomb having hit Paul, he then had to go out and figure out what it meant and how to understand it.

[15 : 33] I remember talking to a young Roman Catholic boy in our parish in Toronto once upon a time. Who, because people were talking about healing, he said, well I grew up with a terrible infection in my ears.

And he said, I went to church one night and the priest said that he had healed me. And so he took the two candles down off the main altar and he came and he left them burning. But he crossed them over my throat and prayed for me.

And my ears were healed. And I never had any help with them again. But, it doesn't mean anything to me. There was no, in a sense, residual understanding of what had taken place.

He had a very dynamic experience. But there was no way that he could understand the meaning of that experience. Now, I was reading. I look for great theological insights in the Manchester Guardian each week.

And there's a lovely one this week, I thought. And they're talking about the disasters that have taken place in England. You know, the football field, the railway, the tube, the plane crashes, the boat on the Thames.

[16 : 42] And all these things are happening. And the Manchester Guardian says, you might consider that it is an act of God. And the great theological insight is, why does God always pick on badly managed places with sloppy practices?

Well, I thought that was a profound theological insight. I thought that was a profound theological insight. But the point is that what happens when one of these disasters takes place is a massive inquiry is set up.

It doesn't do much for the victims of the tragedy. But it tries to inquire into why it happened. And to try and see if there's not some way they can understand it so that that doesn't happen again.

Well, I just use that because I think in a sense it's parallel to what Paul was called to do. He had this powerful encounter with God on the road to Damascus. But then he gave himself time and study and years of work, working through why it happened, what it meant.

This positive disaster that took place for Paul demanded a massive inquiry. And Paul was singularly qualified to conduct that massive inquiry.

[18 : 10] Paul then worked out why it happened to him. Now, you know, I think that you have to understand that in order to establish the basis of communicating the gospel, it's not just a series of miraculous events that happen to people on random occasions.

Those miraculous events are in a sense very superficial because they lead you to make an inquiry into why it happened and what was the cause of it, where was it derived from.

And when you find out the source of it, then you tell people about that. You don't tell them necessarily about the miraculous event. Now, I know as a preacher that if you can promise to perform miraculous events at 7.15 on Saturday nights, people will come.

You know, there used to be a town of Napanee, which down near Kingston where I used to live, and they had a little sign up outside Napanee which said, Revival Saturday at 7.30.

And I thought, well, that's wonderful. You could only do it. But they know that in a sense there's a market for that. But what there really is a market for is understanding why it happens.

[19 : 37] And Paul worked through why it happened. He spent his time in reading, in praying, in study. He had to bring to his research the richness of his own cultural background, his education.

He had to bring all his zeal and all his earnestness and all his commitment. God took over and he ransacked the scriptures.

And he concluded that what had happened to him was not an isolated and accidental event. It was the fulfillment of a promise that God had clearly made through the scriptures.

And so when he went to talk about it, he said, this is what God has been talking about all along.

And he could take Adam and Abraham and Moses. He could take Job and David and Jeremiah. He could take Ezekiel, Isaiah and Amos.

[20 : 39] And he can say, this is what they were talking about. This is the thing that God, through them, has promised and has had written down in the scriptures. And this has come to take place.

And so what happened to me was not a miraculous zapping, which was accidental. It was the result of what God had promised to do a whole long time before.

And so you're confronted with not just the dramatic story of Paul's conversion, but the meaning of it as being the fulfillment of the promise which God has made.

And that's why Paul says, I, Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, set apart for the gospel of God, which was promised through the prophets in the scriptures.

He says, this is what's happened. That's why one of the great sermons in Acts says, this is that which was promised. And the reason I tell you this story, I mean, one of the things that affected my thinking was a story this week of a Vancouver businessman, whom I have no idea who he is, because I've never heard his name, extremely successful in his business, offered a big job in the East with a six-figure salary, and considering going there.

[22 : 05] But what the people who have employed him don't know is they don't know that he's gay, and they don't know that he's alcoholic. And so can he risk accepting this job and moving from where he is to where?

And the counselor that's dealing with him, who's a totally secular counselor, says, you've got to find some meaning in your life somewhere to deal with these things.

There's got to be something. Maybe you could go to AA and at least come in touch with a higher power. Maybe that could be a place you could start.

And then she told me, she said to him, maybe you could even go back to the minister whom you haven't seen for ten years and talk to him, and see if somewhere in your life there isn't the promise which God has made and which you at some point have come in touch with, a promise on which you are prepared to rebuild your life.

And that's why the gospel is, the gospel of God is the promise which God has made a long time before you came along, but one which you desperately need to get in touch with, which we all need to get in touch with.

[23 : 28] You see, to me it's a wonderful thing that that's where it's at, that God has totally committed himself to us in this promise, and that we have to get in touch with that promise.

When Paul talks about God in his letter to Titus, he refers to him as the God who cannot lie. It's impossible for God to lie.

When God has promised, he will perform. You see, the trouble with religion for most of us is that it consists largely in promises we make, which we never intend to keep, and believing promises which we never expect to be fulfilled.

And most of us grow past that, and when we grow past it, we dismiss our religion, because you can't live with promises you're not going to keep, or promises that are never going to be fulfilled.

And that's the way we look at it. Human beings have been defined as being those who can tell themselves a lie and believe it. Well, the God with whom we have to deal cannot tell a lie, and he has made the promise of his purpose to us, and that promise has been fulfilled in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[24 : 53] And we come into relationship with that God as we hear and respond to the gospel, as the gospel hits our life in a sense like a bomb. But instead of destroying us, it heals us, and it gives us life, and it builds what isn't there.

Well, that's what I think we need to understand. Paul was set apart for the gospel. The gospel was a promise which came to fulfillment in Christ. And next week I want to talk to you about how this gospel is rooted right into our time and space world.

Amen. Thank you very much.