

God's Gospel is Power

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[0 : 0 0] So bow our heads and pray as we stand. As we turn to your word now, Heavenly Father, we ask that you would open the heavens and come down to us, that you would give us joy and peace in believing, and that you would fill us with the blessing of Christ, for we ask in his name. Amen.

Amen. I'm on the third week of a very slow and gradual return to work.

And I preached a couple of weeks ago at the 9, and this is my first time back with you at 11. And I just want to say thank you to you for your prayers and kindness and support. Keep praying. That's very helpful to me.

And it's a double privilege today to be preaching to you. First, because this is the first Sunday that we use our brand new ESV, English Standard Version, Pew Bibles.

And I'm not sure what the right verb is. Do you give them a spin? Do you inaugurate them? Do you christen them? I'm not sure what you do with them, but whatever it is, why don't you open up and turn to Romans chapter 1, which Mel just read for us on page 939.

[1 : 3 1] And we're going to do a little bit of Bible traffic later and look around the Bible a little bit. This is a fresh translation and very accurate, and in my view it's the best translation of Romans particularly.

The second reason it's a privilege for me this morning is I get to preach on two of the most overwhelming and magnificent verses in all the Bible, Romans 1, 16 and 17, which is the tune and the theme of Romans.

And I think probably we should have called this sermon, this passage, The Gates of Paradise. Because this was the passage that God used to begin the Reformation 500 years ago when the Roman Catholic monk Martin Luther was in a tower banging away on the text of Romans 1, 16 and 17 and God broke through.

Let me read to you a little of Martin Luther. He said, I had a burning desire to understand what Paul meant in his letter to the Romans. One thing stood in my way, one word in chapter 1, the righteousness of God is revealed in it, you see in verse 17.

I understood that righteousness as God's righteousness by which he punishes sinners who are unrighteous. And I hated the righteous God who punishes sinners.

[3 : 0 4] In silence he said, if I did not blaspheme, certainly I grumbled and I got angry with God. I was raging and I was wild and I was disturbed and I badgered the apostle at this spot in Romans 1 and I anxiously wanted to know what he meant.

He said, I meditated night and day on these words until at last, by God's mercy, I paid attention to their context. Incidentally, a very good thing to do when you're reading the Bible.

The righteousness of God is revealed in it as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. And I began to understand that in this verse the righteousness of God is that by which the righteous person lives by a gift of God, that is by faith.

And all at once I felt as though I had been born again and entered into paradise itself through open gates. Immediately I saw the whole of scripture in a different light.

I exalted this sweetest word of mine, the righteousness of God, with as much love as before I had hated it with hate. Now I'm guessing most people today neither hate nor love the righteousness of God.

[4 : 23] I'm guessing most people think it's probably irrelevant and that they're indifferent to it. But I've been praying as we've been preparing this week that these verses would become for each of us the open gate of paradise.

It doesn't matter how long you've been a Christian believer. Because you see it is the good news of the gospel which has been driving Paul ever since he began to write.

This is why he came to Rome. Look back at verse 14, 15. I'm under obligations to everyone. Verse 15, I'm eager to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome.

Now why is he so eager? I mean, what is it about the gospel that makes the heavens open and God come down? Why is this the gate of paradise? And in verse 16 and 17, these overwhelming verses, the apostle tells us two things.

My microphone's popping in and out. Can you hear that? Anyone else got some advice?

[5 : 36] Before we move from advice into news, anyone else? Okay. Let's look at the good news. Well now, what Paul does in these two verses is two things.

He tells us what the gospel is and how the gospel works. So let's look at the two together. First thing, what is the gospel? Verse 16, very famous words, for I am not ashamed of it.

Let's read this together. This is a good thing for us as a church to read together. Just verse 16, for I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

Now, we know from the early verses God has a gospel, the announcement of his son, born of David and then designated son of God in power through literally the resurrected God raising him from out of the dead ones, Jesus Christ our Lord.

So that the gospel is the announcement that in the person of Christ God's broken the chains of death and sin and now Christ sits at God's right hand and he offers forgiveness and salvation and life and grace and the Holy Spirit to all who turn to him in faith.

[6 : 57] That's what the gospel announces. But Paul says here, and I think this is amazing, that the gospel is the power of God for salvation.

It's not that it has the power, it doesn't come from the power, it doesn't give us access to the power, it is the power of God for salvation and it's very important that's in the present tense.

The gospel is now, today, the power of God for salvation. And as Christians we're very interested in power. Some churches say that their power as a church exists in their pastor and his winning personality and large smile.

Some churches say that the power of God is in the sacrament. Other churches say the power of God is in miracles of healing. But the Bible says that the power of God is in the gospel.

The gospel is the power of God. And the word power the second time he's used it in chapter 1, the first time referring to the resurrection of Jesus. Because the same power that raised Jesus from out of the dead is now at work as we hear and proclaim the gospel.

[8 : 17] That power that God worked 2,000 years ago is made contemporary in the preaching of the gospel. Churches are completely powerless and fragile apart from the gospel.

We are very weak. But if, brothers and sisters, we proclaim and believe and rejoice in the gospel, God will work his power amongst us and through us.

Because the gospel is completely adequate to save every one of us and all who live in Vancouver. It took the great power of God to create the world.

It took the great power of God to rescue his people from Egypt. It took the power of God for Christ to become born as a human. It took the power of God to raise him from the dead.

It takes exactly the same power of God to save men and women and boys and girls from death and sin and destruction. I watched the Star Wars trilogy recently.

[9 : 19] I think they're good which probably dates me a little. I think a lot of Christians think the power of God is something like the force. You know, a vague, untethered, spooky something that we tap into through our spirituality.

That's not the idea at all. It is the announcement of the gospel which is the power of God for salvation. This very, very big word salvation, very precious to us.

The question for us in verse 16, when Paul speaks of salvation, does he mean initial salvation when we first become Christian? Is he saying the gospel is adequate for conversion or is he speaking about the final salvation at the end of the world on the judgment day and saying that the gospel has the power to keep us until that day?

Both are certainly true. The gospel is God's instrument to bring us to faith in the first place. But the context here, I think, makes it certain that Paul is talking about the future salvation at the end of history, that full salvation.

In fact, I think in Romans salvation is almost always the deliverance, the future deliverance on the day of judgment. I mean, who is he writing to?

[10 : 44] Verse 15, he says, I'm eager to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome. And who are they? Verse 6, they're those who already belong to Jesus.

Verse 7, they're those who are loved by God and called to be holy. In verse 8, there's those whose Christian faith is already famous. He said, I want to preach the gospel to you Christian believers in Rome because it's the power of God to keep you through your life, through all the difficulties and all the joys, to keep you through your death and through the judgment day and into the glory of the new creation.

It's only the gospel of God that has the power to keep us through that. Precisely because at the heart and the core of the gospel is the person of Jesus Christ.

As the gospel is preached, Jesus comes to us clothed with the gospel and it's he who will keep us and save us at the last day. That's why the gospel is not something that you leave behind when you become a Christian.

It's not the first steps what it is but it's not just the first steps or the ABC of Christianity. Once you've got it down into three rules or four forms or a slogan then you've got to move on to other things.

[12 : 00] Because Jesus comes to us through the gospel, the gospel is infinitely richer and deeper and more glorious than we could imagine and we grow to know God more and more and the gospel transforms us more and more until we reach the gates of paradise itself.

But I need to say this, the whole idea of salvation assumes that there is something desperately wrong with humanity and that's exactly where Paul goes in verse 18 if you just look at it.

For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

He's speaking of the whole world. Now if you read the newspapers or you're exposed to the news, I don't know how you consume your news now, but if you know what's going on in the world, I find it so disheartening.

Violence, exploitation, grinding poverty, injustice. I find it sometimes easier when I get the newspaper to just do the crossword puzzle. But the Bible tells us that there's something that you'll never read about in the newspapers.

[13 : 25] There's something far worse wrong with the world, something you cannot even see or feel. And if you keep your finger in Romans and turn left to John, just two books, chapter 3, on page 888.

John chapter 3, the last verse, verse 36, page 888. Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life.

Whoever does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God remains on him. This is what is wrong with the world, ultimately.

This is why God so loved the world that he sent his only Son. We do not obey the Son of God, so the wrath of God rests on you.

And when you hear the gospel and place your trust in Christ, you and I are saved from something that we might have been completely unaware of beforehand. that the wrath of God hovers over us and remains on us while we disobey the Son.

[14 : 49] And I wonder if your friends and family know about that. There are some churches that love to speak about the wrath of God as though God's wrath is big and his love is just a small thing.

There are other churches that will never tell you the truth about the wrath of God. But it is part of the expression of God's majestic and righteous love that he is provoked to wrath by our sin.

And it doesn't matter where you came from or what your background is, the gospel is offensive. I mean, we say I've got to learn to believe in myself more.

The answers are in me. And the Bible says and the gospel says believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, the answers are in him. We say as human beings we have infinite potential and we are fundamentally good and decent and the Bible says no, the wrath of God rests on you.

We say, well our lifestyles portray that we think life is really about entertainment and consumption. And the gospel says no, the true happiness is the glory of God and it can be found in Christ alone who comes to us in the gospel.

[15 : 59] We say all religions are basically the same. We ought to leave, leave everyone alone to their own beliefs and the gospel comes and says it's the power of God for salvation for everyone, everyone, everyone.

Just turn over to chapter 2 in Romans. Go back to Romans, page 940. We are going to talk much more about this but in verse 5 Paul is speaking about religious hypocrites.

He says, because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

The reason he says that is not to scare people but because there's no power in the universe other than the gospel that can save us from the wrath of God.

Just turn over to chapter 5 verse 9. Speaking to Christian believers. Romans 5 verse 9.

[17 : 12] Since therefore we have now been justified by his blood, much more, how much more, shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God?

In other words, in the gospel we're not saved by the skin of our teeth. The much more means we are saved so massively and hugely it cannot even be calculated.

That is why I think back in 1.16 Paul says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel. He's writing to Christian believers and they know very well the temptation of what it is to be ashamed.

The other day I was speaking to a guy I know. He does not know that I'm a Christian. He's not a Christian. And we had just met with a woman who escaped the genocide in Bosnia.

And he's a nice bloke and we got to talking about some of the terrible things that were going on in the world. Sex trafficking and child soldiers and ethnic cleansing. And the story in the newspaper that week of a 15 year old girl who'd been bashed to death, very close to where he lives.

[18 : 24] And I thought, I want to say something more but I couldn't figure out what to say to him and so I basically, I just chickened out. And it came to me an hour or two later when it always comes to you what you should have said back in the conversation.

I think I wanted to say to him what do you think is the real problem? And what's the solution? But by then the opportunity had gone. And I think we all have contexts where we find it difficult to stand up for the gospel.

It could be our family or a group of sophisticated friends, people at work or your intellectual circle. Tart, I'm paid to do it and I chicken out.

Here's the Apostle Paul and he's been violently beaten for preaching the gospel and he's writing to Christians who are in a city that's much more cultured and sophisticated than Vancouver, the heart of the Roman Empire.

And he's completely aware that the gospel is absolute foolishness to non-Christians. Why did he say I'm not ashamed? It's not because he's just an eternal optimist, you know, a sort of tiger personality.

[19 : 40] I've met some of those people who are born buoyant and I feel it's been my place in life to make them suffer a little. The reason he says this is because he knows the gospel is the power of God.

You see, I'm under a huge debt because I know this is the power of God to the culture despises as well as to the barbarians. There's one man, there's only one man who was born son of God.

One man who died for our sins. One man who's risen from the dead. One man at the right hand of the father. One salvation. One gospel. It is the gospel which is the power of God. That's what the gospel is.

Point one. My second point is why? Why is the gospel the power of God for salvation? How does it work? And just before we head into the second point, I just want you to see I'm not wearing a watch.

It's been so long since I've preached. I don't know how long I'm going for. And well, I've got a few more pages here. Probably a little more than halfway through.

[20 : 46] So I'm asking for some leeway. I did notice though on the early morning service podium, there's a new stopwatch. And maybe we should have that installed up here, however.

Okay, let's get back to the text. Verse 17. So how does the gospel work? Verse 17. Why is it the power of God for salvation?

For, because in it, the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith as it is written, the righteous shall live by faith.

Now, if you were writing verse 17 and you just said the gospel is the power of God for salvation, what would you then say? Because in it, the what is revealed.

I mean, I might put the love of God is revealed or the grace of God or the mercy of God or the kindness of God, all of which are true. But if you ask the question, why does the gospel have power to save?

[21 : 49] How does it save? The reason is because in it, the righteousness of God is revealed. In our relation with God, righteousness is a central issue.

God demands righteousness through the law. But look at the end of the verse. As it is written, quotes from the Old Testament, the righteous, the righteous person shall live by faith.

Who is this righteous person? I mean, verse 18, we love unrighteousness. I don't want anyone else telling me what's right. Although I don't mind making myself a slave to fashion.

The one person who's not going to tell me what's right is God. The gospel is the power of God for salvation because in it, it reveals, God reveals his righteousness.

The righteousness of God. This is very important. The gospel is not about your human righteousness. It's about God's own righteousness. The righteousness revealed in the gospel, it doesn't originate in us.

[22 : 55] It doesn't come about by my works. It's God's righteousness. And when Paul uses God's righteousness in the book of Romans, it means two things. It means his holy and beautiful and majestic character.

And it also means the gift of his righteousness that comes to us in the person of Jesus Christ. And here is the amazing thing. In Jesus Christ, God gives us his righteousness.

Keep your finger in Romans and let's take the Bibles for another spin. Let's go all the way back to Jeremiah in the Old Testament. Jeremiah chapter 23. Page 650.

This is hundreds of years before the coming of Jesus. The prophet Joel prophesied God would send a Messiah, the son of David. And the Messiah, we'd know the Messiah because he has a particular name.

Look down at verse 5. Jeremiah 23.5. Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous branch.

[24 : 07] And he shall reign as king and deal wisely and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. And in his days Judah will be saved and Israel will dwell securely.

And this is the name by which he will be called. The Lord is our righteousness. Or literally in Hebrew, the Lord, our righteousness. The gospel announces that in the coming of Jesus Christ, Jesus is the Lord, our righteousness.

He has become our righteousness. Go to the other side of Romans to 1 Corinthians. Please. 1 Corinthians chapter 1.

On page 952. Verse 30. 1 Corinthians chapter 1.

Verse 30. And because of him, that is because of God, you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.

[25 : 26] Literally, he has been made our righteousness. We are unrighteous. Christ comes with the righteousness of God.

He is the righteousness of God. And through his death and resurrection, he has made our righteousness. How can God do that and still be right?

One more reference. Go across to 2 Corinthians chapter 5. A very familiar verse. On page 966. This is the only other place, incidentally, in the New Testament where exactly the Greek words in Romans 1.17, righteousness of God, are used.

2 Corinthians 5.21. For our sake, God made him, speaking of Jesus, to be sin, who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

That is why the gospel is the power of God for salvation, because God makes us right with himself, righteously.

[26 : 40] God makes him sin, and Jesus, he transfers his wrath to Jesus, and the wrath is satisfied. And for everyone who is in Christ Jesus, we become the righteousness of God.

So if we go back to Romans 1, this is what God is doing in the gospel. He is offering us his own personal righteousness by offering us his son, Christ Jesus. Brothers and sisters, if you trust in Christ Jesus, everything that belongs to him is yours.

That is why the person at the end of verse 17, the righteous person, shall live by faith. He's not someone or she's someone who lives a really good life, although they will.

He's not someone who has built their own righteousness and obeyed the Ten Commandments and built hospitals and orphanages. It's the person who does not try to offer God her own righteousness, but receives the righteousness of God through Jesus Christ, the righteousness based on faith, a righteousness we could never develop for ourselves, God's righteousness.

This is way more than just forgiveness. It's not that in the gospel, God just wipes our slate clean and says, okay, you go back and do the rest yourselves. From beginning to end, the Christian life is standing on the righteousness of Christ.

[28 : 06] And when we come to chapter 6, we'll see that nobody receives the righteousness of Christ without then daily growing in righteous behaviour.

In fact, the proof, the proof that you have grasped Christ by faith is that you live and you die standing on him and your life bears fruit for righteousness.

But here in chapter 1, the gospel is the triumph of God's righteousness, not ours. And it's just a miracle. I mean, it's just, think about it.

I mean, we are not perfect. We sin every day. We fall and repent. But if we are bound to Jesus Christ, if we're in Jesus Christ, God looks on us as having his own righteousness.

That's how the gospel works. God knows your heart and knows your thoughts better than you do and we do. And he acquits us from all the guilt that we deserve because of Christ.

[29 : 05] And he keeps us and he takes us to heaven when we deserve to go to hell. And you could never make this up. Which is why Paul says that in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed, is ongoingly, present tense, now being revealed.

As I'm speaking this to you, God is revealing his righteousness to you. And the word for reveal is the word apocalypse. And it's much more than just a private mental insight.

Suddenly I reveal, I get something clear. Apocalypse is, if you divide apocalypse, the last part, the calypse, means literally to bury something in the ground.

To take a body and hide it and conceal it, covering it with dirt, which is exactly what we do. We suppress the truth. That we know about God, we bury the truth, we cover it with our own unrighteousness.

And when we do that, we find that we've buried ourselves in darkness and death. But when God reveals his own righteousness, it's not just he's uncovering something to our minds, he's actually raising us out of that grave we've dug for ourselves.

[30 : 12] He's not just turning over a new leaf, or he's not just clearing out the garbage from my life. It's an apocalypse. It's God's mighty action of raising the dead. That's why the gospel has to be about what God does and not what we do.

That's why it's news and not advice. When the gospel's preached and apocalypse happens, God comes, God offers himself to us, his very self, turning towards us who are covered with unrighteousness, taking that covering of unrighteousness off and clothing us with the righteousness of Jesus Christ.

In the gospel, he snatches us from death and he brings us into a new master and a new life with a new status and a new standing and a new lifestyle. As we hear this and our hearts are open to God, we are constantly stunned that God gives us his own righteousness in Christ.

That's full salvation and that's the gate of paradise. This week, I picked up this magazine. I'm concluding with this, Body, Soul and Spirit.

I was going to say I found it on Dan's desk but he gets touchy when I say those things. I didn't really. This is an amazing magazine and it has a wide readership here in Vancouver.

[31 : 30] I think it's printed here in Vancouver and it's full of advertisements and articles like this one, Discover the Number One Secret that's holding you back from full empowerment. Do you want better health, more energy, and much happier relationships?

Do you want to be closer to your children, your spouse, yourself? Are you sick of being sick and need more energy? Or, do you feel overwhelmed with life?

Is something holding you back from reaching your potential? Do you struggle with parenting, relationships, wealth problems, bad habits, stress, or indecision? Is anyone not covered so far?

Or, well, let me just tell you, they offer an amazing array of therapies. Embracing your angel, aura imaging, chakra cleansing, I'm not sure what that is, soul retrieval.

There's even an ad here on this page that offers to connect with your deceased pets. My favourite is the healing power of my own voice.

[32 : 41] Let me read this to you. Are you looking to make things right in your world? It's simpler than you think. With voice-activated sacred scalar rejuvenation system, you can use the power of your own voice to heal yourself.

It is our wish that you live the life you were designed to live. It's your birthright to live in joy and peace. The doorway to peace is through the frequency in your own voice group discounts for eight or more.

Now, my own view is that these promises are a bit over the top, but I think, I want to say the thrust of the magazine and what it represents is completely understandable.

Is that a call from the magazine? Sorry. Is there another therapy? I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that. I'm serious.

The desire to fix ourselves is very deep within us and I think the reason it's deep within us is because we were made for Eden. We were made for paradise.

[33 : 57] The Bible says that the gate of paradise can only be opened from the inside. It only opens from God's side and that's what he has done in Jesus Christ and his righteousness.

It's very interesting when you come to the end of the book of Romans that the language of Christian experience is fullness of joy, fullness of peace.

It's a little bit like this magazine, fullness of well-being. God is called the source of personal encouragement and hope and absolute welcome. Paul says, I want to come to you in Rome in the fullness of the blessing of Christ.

But all of that comes out of receiving the gift of the righteousness of Christ. And how does it come to us? Of course, the word that I haven't mentioned is faith, which comes four times in these verses.

Faith, not something that we do to get God's righteousness. Faith, an empty vessel, the open hand. It means coming to God with an open heart. It means saying, yes, I receive Jesus with wholehearted trust.

[35 : 06] It means committing myself utterly to him, living on him, living in him, living for him, living to him. It means receiving the joy and the peace and the blessing of Christ as we grow to see his glory more clearly.

It is by faith we walk through the gate of paradise because it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. Amen.