

The gospel advances to the ends of the earth

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Preacher: Andy Hunter, FIEC

[0 : 0 0] Daniel and good morning, great to be here at Westerhailes Baptist Church. Thank you for your invitation and it goes without saying that I'm delighted and encouraged that Westerhailes Baptist Church is looking to be part of the Fellowship of Independent Evangelical Churches, FIEC for short. Just to introduce myself, my name is Andy Hunter, married to Jessica with three children on their teens back in Glasgow. My home church is Greenview Evangelical Church on the south side of Glasgow. I'm an elder there and prior to that I was a pastor for nine years and now I work full-time trying to support churches in Scotland and the north of England in various ways and I thought it'd be good just to give you a few bits of news about what FIEC is doing, particularly in Scotland that hopefully encourage you and just be of interest to you as you become part of this network. So I think there's a few slides that are going to go up. It goes without saying that we live in a time where Bible-believing Christians in the United Kingdom are a tiny minority, probably less than three percent of the population, maybe two percent, maybe one percent, we're not sure but it's in that kind of area. And of course in a time like this it's very easy for Bible-believing churches like my home church, Greenview Evangelical, or here in Edinburgh, Westerhailes, to feel discouraged, to feel isolated, perhaps to feel that the task of trying to reach the nation again or have an impact with the gospel is just such a huge mountain to climb that it's really beyond us. And a couple of years ago here in Edinburgh at Charlotte Chapel, which is one of the churches that's part of the FIEC network in Scotland, we had a mission forum and the strapline of that mission forum as you can see there is, if you can do it on your own, it's not big enough. I really wanted to get together to think about mission in Scotland and how churches and FIEC churches could perhaps work together to advance mission more effectively, to be a bit more than the sum of our parts when it comes to proclaiming the gospel. And that's really the big vision of FIEC. It's independent churches, there's no handcuffs, churches affiliate on a yearly basis, they can drop out at any time, so they're completely free.

FIEC doesn't try to run churches or have control over them in any sense, but we're united around a strong statement of faith. In one sense we are united around a strong biblical statement of faith so we can be different in every other way. And you'll find there's quite a diversity of FIEC churches in terms of their background, brethren, baptist, congregational, mission hall, new church plants, different formats, some that are quite contemporary, some that are more traditional, and so on and so forth. So there's no uniform that FIEC tries to impose upon churches, it is the gospel that unites us.

And that desire to have a vision for the nation, that actually that together with brothers and sisters and churches across the nation, we can have an impact together for the gospel that perhaps will be difficult for us to do on our own. So if you think of the vision that I think we'd all want to have for Britain and for the gospel, we'd all want to see unreached areas of the United Kingdom being reached with the gospel. It used to be you could name any area or town in the UK and you could be fairly confident there'd be some kind of evangelical witness there, maybe a small church or a mission hall or some kind of outreach. Increasingly of course there are huge population communities in the UK today where there's no evangelical Bible witness whatsoever. Sometimes there's just no church of any type whatsoever in them. How do we reach these areas in the north of England or the south of England or in central Scotland or the Highlands if we're just a local church on our own in a particular place?

It's hard to do that, isn't it? We might not even know these areas exist. We can't send people there or resources, but together with others we could perhaps enable outreach to happen in those areas. We'd want to see pastors and church leaders being well supported and cared for. So if they go through difficulties or trials or they need support or guidance, there's perhaps a network there that

can give them some encouragement and give them some kind of guidance or support or help at that time.

[4 : 30] How do we do that for a pastor or a church which is struggling down in Southampton or in Aberdeen if we're in Edinburgh? And so forth and so on. We'd like to see the next generation of gospel workers, men and women being raised up to work in gospel ministry, whether that's youth work or children's work or pastoral ministry or an evangelist or a missionary. But how do we train them up? Where does an independent church get its next pastor from? Who's going to train them? It's difficult for one local church to do that themselves, but actually together we can be investing in training for that next generation of gospel workers. So really FIEC is just enabling churches who have that gospel vision for outreach and for pastoral support and for training to be able to put that into practice, to give some concrete expression to it. So Wester Hills Baptist Church can, through its contribution and partnership in partnership in the gospel, be supporting a pastor who's gone off sick in Burnley, or can be training a women's worker in Liverpool, or can be supporting a church plant down in Devon, for example, having a big gospel vision for the nation. That's really what FIEC is all about.

So I want to give you very briefly just a few examples of that in Scotland. I'm not going to take too long because there's lots and lots I could say. But the next slide is just a picture of five church plants that FIEC are currently supporting in Scotland just now. Two of them are connected to Nidra Community Church here in Edinburgh, which is an FIEC affiliated church. Two of those are 20 schemes church plants, Hope Church in Balaamuk in Glasgow, and Hope Church here in Edinburgh in Bingen.

You'll see the hall there. That was an old Brethren hall that was gifted to this new work in Bingen. And an FIEC church was closing down in England just about that time. And they came to FIEC and said, look, we want to use the money that's going to be left over from the sale of our building now that we're closing down to invest in a gospel work somewhere else. So our work here is finished, but we'd like the legacy of our gospel work to be perhaps a new church being started somewhere else, so we can continue our work in that sense. And we were able to connect them with Bingen and get about £40,000 transferred over to Bingen so that they could refurbish that hall. And it's now being used in the city here for outreach. They've seen some people coming to faith, seen some baptisms, and it's great to see that work going forward. So FIEC, in one sense, joins the dots between different churches that might not know of different needs or opportunities, but actually through the network can get in touch with each other. New Hope Church in Balmedie, just north of Aberdeen, that's very embryonic, really just a church planter and his wife trying to get something going at the moment.

Grace Church up in Orkney, and Lockleaven Church in Kinross. So be encouraged that there is church planting going on. The gospel is taking root in new communities where it hasn't been before in our nation. The next slide. This is just the last, no, the second last one to leave you with. Out of that mission forum that I talked about two years ago, one of the people that came along to that was a former Charlotte Chapel member who had been an OMF missionary, Eric Thompson and his wife Emma Thompson. And they came and said, we're now living in Aviemore. We're running a guest house there. There's a real need for a mainline Bible teaching gospel church in Aviemore. It's a growing town. It's developing in lots of ways. One and a half thousand new houses are planned there in the future. They've now got an Aldi's and a Costa and all these things that are happening there. They've got investment in a new hospital, but there's no investment in new churches. We're not thinking ahead in terms of who's going to reach this new community, this growing community with the gospel. And so out of that, we got a team together. We got some support from some contacts in America. And we asked FIEC churches and others around Scotland if they would contribute a small amount to the cost of getting a church planter to go up there and to begin a new work, try to crowd fund it in that sense. And we're delighted that just in June this year, Kenny Rogan and his wife Leslie, Kenny's the guy in the white t-shirt, moved up to the area and have now started that work of trying to form a core team and make contacts in the area. And that work is just kind of beginning to start to take root there in Aviemore. So do pray for that. But again, I just want to give you that sense that that wouldn't have happened in that way anyway without FIEC.

[9 : 27] And there's churches all across Scotland now who are contributing towards that, a small amount every year to pay for Kenny and the costs of having him there. And they can say that

they're supporting and have a share and a stake in a church plant in Aviemore in Scotland, which encourages them because actually a lot of those churches wouldn't be able to do a church plant themselves, wouldn't have the resources to do that or the wherewithal to do that off their own backs. And finally, just something which is coming up in the next week or so, we run a course. We've done this for three years previously.

We're doing it this year again, the Certificate in Independent Church Ministry. We run it here in Edinburgh at ETS, Edinburgh Theological Seminary, the Free Church College. It's for students there who aren't studying to be free church ministers, but will go on and perhaps work in churches like this and other independent churches. And it's a Tuesday afternoon class to help them think about some of the dynamics and realities of working in an independent church as opposed to a denominational church.

So we think about the history of independency and the theology of independency and the practicalities of running a self-governing church. That's open to anybody. You can do it online, so you don't have to go into Edinburgh on a Tuesday afternoon. You can do it from your office or your lounge. If you've got a laptop, you can stream in. The facilities are there. It starts a week on Tuesday, but it's not too late to sign up. If you want to go to the ETS website, you can register there. There's more information about it. And actually, there's one or two leaflets outside. I'm going to stop because I could just go on and on and on about FIEC stuff. Follow us on Facebook or on Twitter and you'll get regular news updates. We'll feed through there about things that are going on across the nation.

Let's turn to God's Word now. Have our Bible reading before we sing again. And we're going to be reading this morning from Acts chapter 12. End of Acts chapter 12 into Acts 13. And we're going to start our reading at verse 24 of Acts chapter 12. Let's hear God's words.

But the Word of God continued to spread and flourish. When Barnabas and Saul had finished their mission, they returned from Jerusalem, taking with them John, also called Mark. Now in the church of Antioch, there were prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manain, who'd been brought up with Herod the Tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them. So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off. The two of them sent on their way by the Holy Spirit went down to Seleucia and sailed from there to Cyprus. When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the Word of God in the Jewish synagogues. John was with them as their helper. They travelled through the whole island until they came to Pappus. There they met a Jewish sorcerer and false prophet named Bar-Jesus, who was an attendant of the proconsul Sergius Paulus. The proconsul, an intelligent man, sent for Barnabas and Saul because they wanted to hear the Word of God.

[13 : 09] But Elmas, the sorcerer, for that is what his name means, opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul from the faith. Then Saul, who was also called Paul, filled with the Holy Spirit, looked straight to Elmas and said, you are a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right. You are full of all kinds of deceit and trickery. Will you never stop perverting the right ways of the Lord?

Now the hand of the Lord is against you. You are going to be blind for a time, not even able to see the light of the sun. Immediately mist and darkness came over him and he groped about seeking someone to lead him by the hands. When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. May God bless to his reading of his holy and inspired words.

Amen. Thank you for that. Very appropriate hymn, which I hope will become clear as we look at God's words this morning. If you've got your Bible there, please do have it open at Acts chapter 12, 13, as we'll be looking at that this morning.

The story of the early church, the progress of the gospel in the first century, is nothing if not a bit of a roller coaster as we go through the book of Acts. Had we started our reading this morning at the start of chapter 12, rather than at the end of it, we would have seen a church that seemed to be in a bit of a crisis. Herod had launched a fresh wave of persecution. He'd executed James. Peter was in prison.

The Christians were in lockdown, huddled together in an emergency prayer meeting. And yet, by the end of chapter 12, where we picked up the reading, Herod is dead, Peter is free, and that great little summary verse in verse 24 tells us that the word of God continued to spread and flourish. Through all, through all the ups and downs, the drama, the hanging by a thread moments, the

spread of the gospel, the growth of the church was simply unstoppable. And that, of course, has been the story of the last 2000 years. All across the world today, the gospel is advancing. Men and women are coming to faith in Jesus Christ. Doesn't feel like that so much here, as I noted in the introduction about FIEC. But the reality is that as European Bible-believing Christians this morning, we are outnumbered by our brothers and sisters in South America, 10 to 1. In China alone, 10 to 1. More people will go to church today in China than in the whole of Europe, including the old Eastern Bloc countries. The reason, of course, is that this is God's work. And Jesus always wins in the end. That doesn't mean, of course, that we don't have a part to play, or indeed a responsibility for this great work. Because God advances his people, advances his purposes, rather, through people, through ordinary Christians like you and me.

[16:45] In that sense, the early church didn't just sit back and wait for all these things to happen. It went out in a very real sense that made them happen. And in Acts chapter 13, we see mission-minded people, the kind of people that we should be ourselves. Now, I started reading in chapter 12, verse 24, because verse 24, as well as being a great summary of first century gospel advance, is also one of those little phrases that Luke uses in the book of Acts when he's indicating that he is closing off one section of the book and moving on to another. And we're moving at this point in the book of Acts in terms of the storyline of the book, away from Peter, who has been the central character of the book up until now. We're moving away from Jerusalem and Judea, where most of the action has taken place. And the camera, as it were, is about to swing northwest up to Antioch. Antioch, a city in southern Turkey on the coast near the border with modern-day Syria. It's the place where the followers of Jesus were first called Christians in chapter 11 of the book of Acts. And we move to Antioch because

Luke tells us that's where Barnabas and Paul are in chapter 12, verse 25. And then at the start of chapter 13, we are told a bit about this church in Antioch and we can see that it was a pretty cosmopolitan congregation. There was Barnabas, who we know was from Cyprus. There was Simeon, probably a black African, where the name Niger comes from. There was Lucius, who would be from modern-day Libya. There was Manan from Judea back in Israel. And of course there was Saul, or as he is better known, Paul, who was from Tarsus in modern-day Turkey. So already we see the gospel has been reaching people from various nations.

We saw that, or would have seen that back in chapter 2, had we read from the start of the book. But so far in the book of Acts, as readers, by the time we've got to chapter 13, we have still to see the gospel go overseas. We've still to see the gospel move out of what we would call today the Near East.

We have not seen it, as readers, make contact with the Gentile world on its own turf, so to speak. The Gentiles who have come to faith so far in Acts, like the Roman centurion in chapter 10, have done so within the Jewish world. So while parts 1 and 2 of Jesus' instructions at the start of the book had been completed, that is to take the gospel to Jerusalem and to Judea, and then to Samaria, the final and biggest part of his commission, to take the gospel to the ends of the earth, has still to be tackled in the book. And Acts chapter 13 is the launch pad for that phase of the mission. That's why it's such an important chapter.

And in it, this chapter, we will see mission-minded people praying, preparing, and proclaiming. So let's dive in and look at these three headings.

[20:12] This was a church that was praying, verses 2 to 3. Verse 2, they were worshipping and fasting.

Now, worship, of course, covers quite a wide range of activities. It really could include anything that gives service to God in a way that exalts God. So in that sense, everything that you and I do in life should be an act of worship.

When we go to work tomorrow morning, or whatever we're doing tomorrow morning, should be an act of worship. We should do it for God in a way that gives glory to God. But here, the word worship is in the narrower sense that we typically think about when we talk about worship, the sense of singing and praising and praying.

And verse 2 also mentions they were fasting. So we know that prayer would have been very much at the heart of what they were doing. Because we know that fasting on its own is of no spiritual value.

Might do you a bit of good health-wise to skip lunch now and again. But it's not going to mystically create any spiritual benefit on its own. But as an aid to prayer, fasting can help us in a number of

ways.

[21 : 23] It can free up time. The time we would have spent eating or cooking could be spent praying. It can be a physical nudge to prayer. That rumble in our stomach, that little hunger pang, is that little prompt to say, remember, about that thing that you are wanting to set aside time to pray for and to focus on.

It's also a statement that we are prioritising taking hold of God above and beyond even our physical needs. Now, of course, you need wisdom in fasting.

Remember the Old Testament when King Saul commanded his men to fast on a day of battle? That was a really dumb instruction to give them.

I mean, the day of battle is when you want your men to be fuelled up and full of energy and ready to go. That's the last day you tell them not to eat. And, of course, if you know the story, they get into all sorts of problems and Jonathan, his son, doesn't realise there's been this order and he eats some honey and everything goes a bit wrong.

But it might be that if you're in a phase of life with young children or heavy demands or health needs, you need to think, is this the best time for me to be fasting? But at other times, it can be a great help.

[22 : 39] Be wise about it. But we also know that in the Bible, fasting is often done because of a particularly repressing need. Often people pray and fast in a time of crisis or because they're seeking special guidance.

And we don't know explicitly what the folks in Antioch were fasting and praying about, but in the context of Acts, in the context of the people involved, and in the context of what then follows, I think it's safe to assume that at the heart of their prayers would have been the issue of gospel advance. That is the question of what do we do next? Where do we go from here? How do we take forward the great commission of Jesus to take the gospel out into the world in our day?

The book of Acts is all about mission. That was the great concern of the early church. And by implication, mission would have been at the heart of their prayers, pretty much at the top of their prayer lists, I'm guessing.

Easy to lose sight of that today, isn't it? Even when the need is so huge, 90 plus percent of the Scottish population lost and ignorant of the gospel.

[24 : 00] You would think in a time where there was such spiritual needs that actually we would pray about nothing else. That all we would do is pray about is mission. And yet the converse often happens as we get smaller and as the need gets bigger.

It can almost recede from our prayers. Perhaps we just feel so overwhelmed by it. As Alistair Begg provocatively noted, it's the kind of thing that Alistair Begg can say, so many church prayer meetings seem more concerned about keeping Christians out of heaven than non-Christians out of hell.

And I need to challenge myself about this. We had our first community group meeting of the new session just last Thursday there. And we were talking about things that we would like to progress in in our Christian lives.

What are the things we'd like to be better at as Christians? And how could this group, as we meet together week by week, help us to do that over the coming months? And I had to be very honest and say, I feel evangelism is a huge weakness in my life.

I'm a Christian leader. I work and breathe and live among other Christians other than my wider family who are largely non-Christian. I come in contact with painfully few Christians that I have conversations with that might lead to gospel opportunities.

[25 : 25] And I ask them to pray for me about that, that that would change over the coming months. We pray for people having a heart operation. What about those who need heart change?

My own church, we've got a number of young people and in the run-up to the summer, we'll often hear prayers, praying that they'll do well in their exams. Not so many prayers the rest of the year that they'll do well in evangelism.

We pray that somebody will find a job, but what about finding Christ? Now don't mishear me. It's not either or, is it? It's both and. Those practical, physical needs are important and things that we rightly bring before God and we should pray about.

But I need to be much more explicit and deliberate in praying for mission and for the lost and for opportunities to reach people, especially in prayer meetings.

But as a result of these prayers, this worshipping and fasting, verse 2, they were prompted. That is, they were spoken to by the Holy Spirit to set apart Barnabas and Saul.

[26 : 37] As they worshipped, the Holy Spirit gave the church its instructions. Now how did that work? It's an intriguing question, isn't it?

An audible voice? Possibly. Perhaps it came through a word spoken prophetically by one of the prophets in the church. Whatever your view of continuing gifts, Luke notes there were prophets in the church at that time.

Maybe it was a sense of shared inner conviction as they prayed and discussed and reflected in this that just came together in a kind of unity of thought. But let me suggest that whatever the mechanism for that word and that sense of guidance coming from the Holy Spirit, that this instruction would have made sense.

It would have seemed appropriate to them. After all, Barnabas and Saul were known to be faithful servants, men of consistent character, people who had already demonstrated some gifting and commitment and outreach.

And I think that's an important point for us in local churches. Because when Saul came to faith, when he was dramatically converted on the Damascus road, God had said to Saul that he would be his messenger to the Gentiles.

[27 : 53] So I guess Saul could have stood up at this point and just unilaterally said, hey folks, I've got a personal call from God. I'm off. But interestingly, he only goes when that call is collectively embraced and validated by the wider church.

That's an important principle for us. If you feel called by God, perhaps for some kind of set-aside ministry or to go and do something for him, that that call is recognised and validated by your brothers and sisters and your church leadership.

Because otherwise, there is just the possibility that we could be deluded. I've seen lots of churches sadly torn apart or afflicted because there's somebody who's got a vision of what the church should do or what they should be doing and they get very annoyed and grumpy because other people aren't getting behind them or don't seem to have this vision or aren't doing what they think they should be doing.

We're put in churches so that our collective wisdom can inform each other. We need to be humble about that. But crucially, God's guidance is connected to their engagement with God.

They're seeking after God, isn't it? There's a lot of things in Acts that I would suggest are not normative. Some of them are quite unusual. There may be some that are even unique.

[29 : 20] But I think we can say with confidence that when we are seeking God's guidance, there is still no substitute for your quiet time or praying with others. or being at the church prayer meeting.

So they prayed about mission and where God wanted them to go. Secondly, they prepared.

Verse 3, this is a shorter point. It's interesting, they're having been told to set apart Barnabas and Saul. The next step is that they fast and pray some more.

Perhaps because they now want to think about where to send them. It's one thing to say set apart for these people, but where and how are the next questions? And again, let me suggest that's a process in which they would have engaged their brains.

In terms of heading out, Cyprus was a strategic stepping stone island. if you were going west into the Mediterranean, you can just look at that on the map.

[30 : 26] And of course, it was also where Barnabas came from. So he would know people there. He would have contacts, he would know the customs, might be able to get accommodation arranged.

It wasn't a crazy, completely random option. It made sense. Now of course, God sometimes leads people in very counterintuitive ways.

We love those stories, don't we? We love the stories where God uses somebody completely unlikely in the most unusual and confounding situation to accomplish his will.

And praise God that he does that to keep us humble and to show us who's truly in charge. But in God's providence, it's normal for God to lead people in ways that he has prepared them for.

Paul was an internationalist, multilingual, a Roman citizen, just the kind of person you would imagine God had been preparing to lead the great gospel advance out west.

[31 : 30] Some of you know Dick Lucas, minister of St. Helen's, formerly down in London, great mentor to many pastors and preachers, a great ministry of encouraging good biblical teaching

through proclamation, trust, and various other conferences.

But if you know anything about Dick Lucas, you'll know that he is a public school boy. He is as posh and pucker as you can get. Maybe no surprise that God sent him to the city of London to reach all the other posh public school boys.

Mentioned in every community, Churchill in Edinburgh, we all know Mez McConnell. If you know his testimony, it's a story of drugs and prison and poverty. Perhaps no surprise that God is using him to reach into some of the most deprived and difficult areas of our nation.

Now, of course, there are exceptions, but for most of us, and indeed the starting point for us when it comes to thinking about our mission field is simply, who are we connected to?

What are our interests and skills? Where do we live? Because the chances are your personal mission field is in those places.

[32 : 47] But lastly then, finally, they proclaimed, they prayed, they prepared, and they proclaimed, Saul and Barnabas begin the first overseas mission trip to Cyprus, and Luke gives a little nod to the value of on-the-job training, by noting they take John Mark along as an assistant, and they travel across the island from north-east to south-west, and they reach the capital, Papos.

And the ministry is obviously having an impact because it gets the attention of the Roman governor, Sergius Paulus, verse 7. And Luke notes that he was, verse 7, an intelligent man.

Roman governors weren't born into their positions. You had to be pretty capable and shrewd to climb the greasy pole of Roman politics. But encouragingly, this interest is the sign of an intelligent mind, a mind that wants to ask questions and find out things for itself.

Perhaps if Sergius Paulus was about today, he would be asking, can we trust the Bible? Is the resurrection credible? Why has Christianity been so transformative to individuals and whole societies?

What's so unique about Jesus? Intelligent questions. That's why we have Christianity explored and Alpha courses so people can come along.

[34 : 15] Christianity is an intelligent faith that invites intelligent people to come and to ask reasonable questions. So this first recorded, thoroughly pagan Gentile was no dummy.

And here we see the Gospels getting traction with intelligent, capable people who have little if any connection at this point to the world of biblical faith.

In other words, the kinds of people that most of us increasingly live and work among. Now that's encouraging, isn't it? It's encouraging to know that the Gospel makes sense to intelligent people.

But things aren't straightforward. There's opposition. Always is when the Gospel gets to work in the shape of Bar Jesus. Verse 6, the sorcerer, false prophet, showman, one of the governor's attendants, and perhaps seeing that his services may no longer be required by a Christian governor, tries to turn his boss from the faith.

And Paul, as Peter had done on another occasion, has to confront this sorcerer. And filled with the Holy Spirit, verse 10, he doesn't mince his words, does he? You're a child of the devil and an enemy of everything that is right.

[35 : 42] Bar Jesus or Elemis has no excuse. As somebody from a Jewish background, verse 6, he would have known that occultism was devilish and utterly forbidden. By scripture.

And Paul pronounces a judgment on him to cause temporary blindness, verse 11. It's a very vivid sign of God making this man physically what he was spiritually.

Lost and enslaved in darkness. The great statement that though there are evil forces actively opposing the gospel, it is the gospel that has ultimate power.

The gospel will prevail because Jesus always wins in the end. But we might be thinking just to tie this off. Well, no wonder Sergius Paulus became a Christian.

I mean, most of the people I know probably would as well if I could pull that kind of thing off. And there can be no doubt that the effects must have been dramatic. But notice what Luke says Sergius Paulus was amazed by.

[36 : 45] And it wasn't the miracle per se, but rather verse 12, he was amazed at the teaching about the Lord. Miracles, of course, can only take you so far.

Sure, bar Jesus has a box of devilish tricks which, like Pharaoh's magicians, could have deceived people. But actually, it's the message. It's hearing about Jesus.

It's hearing the words of Jesus. It's understanding yourself in the light of Jesus, which is truly amazing. Understanding that your life, however messed up, is loved and savable.

That Jesus, the Son of God, loves you personally. Actually you. You individually, not the person in front of you or two rows to the back who always seems really sorted, the kind of person that you would expect Jesus might be interested in and love.

No, you. I read an interview with Clive James, the Australian journalist, a while ago and he talked about how he had rejected faith in Christianity as a young man because he couldn't believe that there could be a God who could be so powerful and so vast to create the whole universe and to sustain it, but could simultaneously also be interested in him personally as this tiny speck among all.

[38 : 12] It just didn't add up to him. It didn't compute. That a God who could hold the cosmos in his hands could also, as it were, have a personal relationship with this ant, this flea in the great scheme of creation.

But just imagine that God is the God of the Bible. Just imagine that God actually does have an interest in you individually, personally, knows you, knows your heart, knows your life, cares about you.

just imagine that he loved you enough to send his son to die for you, to suffer for you on the cross, for you, for your sins, so he could pull back a seat at his table for you to sit down and have that fellowship and relationship with him in his own house so that you could be forgiven, so that you could be renewed and have a glorious future.

Now that's amazing. That is amazing if that is true. That is the gospel. Never mind a wee miracle.

And if we're prepared to humble ourselves, open our hearts to God, ask for his forgiveness, give our lives over to Jesus, good rule, let me say this morning, the gospel will validate itself.

This is the good news, the stunning news that the early church took out and it's no less good and no less amazing today.

[39 : 45] May God bless these thoughts to us. We're going to sing our best to live