

Retelling HIStory: The Depth of the Gospel

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Searcy, Arkansas
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Scripture Reading

And the Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, preached the gospel beforehand to Abraham, saying, “In you shall all the nations be blessed” (Galatians 3:8).

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations” (Romans 1:1-5).

INTRODUCTION

Last week, we opened our Bibles to 1 Corinthians 15. There the Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthians of the “gospel”—the good news that brings tremendous joy to all the world. So what is it? Paul says it’s the announcement of what God did in Jesus Christ. “This is a matter of first importance,” says Paul: Christ died for us. Christ was buried and raised for us. Christ appeared to many after his resurrection. This...says Paul...is the gospel you received. It’s the gospel you believed. It’s the gospel on which you have taken your stand. And it’s the gospel we preach. The gospel—the good news—is what God did in Jesus Christ.

Sounds simple enough. Simple? Yes. But simplistic? Not on your life. An early church father once said reading the Bible is like appreciating the ocean: it’s shallow enough for children to wade, and deep enough for whales to swim. And the gospel is like that.

Last week I challenged you to claim the gospel as your “one thing”: the focus of your life. The lens through which you see everything. Your lens can be simple. But since it affects and even defines everything else, it’s anything but simplistic.

GOSPEL STRANDS: BASIS AND GOAL

The gospel is deep and wide. We get the first inkling that there is more here than meets the eye, when we look again at the second passage we read last week: Romans 5:6-11.

“At just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person someone might possibly dare to die. But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, while we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life! Now only is this so, but we also boast in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Rom 5:6-11).

The word “gospel” doesn’t appear there, but here Paul pulls on some of the threads that he only briefly summarized back in 1 Corinthians when he said the gospel is what Christ did for us. For example, under the general heading of “Christ died for our sins,” Paul adds here “and that was when you were powerless to die for your own sins.” And it wasn’t just some past indiscretion that messed things up a long time ago. No, it was an ever-present reality. And it wasn’t like God had to do it. He wanted to do it. He longed to do it. Because salvation is rooted in the love of God. For a good or righteous person someone might die; but God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. And under the heading “He was raised from the dead”, Paul says that raising means we are justified—justified by his blood and reconciled back to God! And under the heading of “he made appearances to many” Paul says the resurrected Jesus heals our broken relationships with people and even more than that, he wants to reconcile the whole world. And when Paul says in 1 Corinthians that this is the gospel you “received,” Paul says in Romans 5 what we also received when we received the gospel was we received this whole package, this whole promise, this whole cosmic reality of “reconciliation.” God didn’t just pay a past debt; God is making everything right.

And even this, where Paul pulls out three or four strands—the love of God as the basis of the gospel, reconciliation as the fruit and goal of the gospel—this is just the hem of the garment; the tip of the iceberg.

GOSPEL STRANDS: DAVIDIC MESSIAH & GENTILE MISSION

There is depth to the gospel. We see even more depth when we turn to Romans chapter 1. Paul begins what many consider to be his magnum opus by telling us how the gospel

connects to the story that God has been telling through all of history. Listen to his words in the New International Reader’s version:

I, Paul, am writing this letter. I serve Christ Jesus. I have been appointed to be an apostle. God set me apart to tell others his good news. He promised the good news long ago. He announced it through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures. The good news is about God’s Son. He was born into the family line of King David. By the Holy Spirit, he was appointed to be the mighty Son of God. God did this by raising him from the dead. He is Jesus Christ our Lord. We received grace because of what Jesus did. He made us apostles to the Gentiles. We must invite all of them to obey God by trusting in Jesus. We do this to bring glory to him. You also are among those Gentiles who are appointed to belong to Jesus Christ. (NIrV)

Right off the bat, we see that the gospel—the good news that brings great joy to all the world—wasn’t just announced on that cool and starry night on the outskirts of Bethlehem to shepherds keeping watch over their field by night. No—it was given as a promise long ago, announced through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures. You know, Paul hinted at this even back in 1 Corinthians 15 if we were careful enough to notice it. There, in Paul’s summary of the gospel, he doesn’t just say “Christ died for our sins and rose again” he says TWICE that he died and was raised “according to the Scriptures.” We usually read that as a Christian evidence passage: “like the prophecy said so.” But Paul is using it as a connecting line: the gospel you received, the gospel you accepted, the gospel on which you have taken your stand, is the gospel that the scriptures have talked about and pointed toward this whole time. There’s a fact about the gospel—a strand, if you will—that Paul pulls out for us.

Here’s a second strand. The gospel is about Jesus Christ—God’s Son. That’s the simple truth. But who is Jesus Christ? He’s the one long-awaited, talked about in the prophets, and whispered about by every Jewish parent at every single birth, wondering “could this be him?” We see this point made in 2 Timothy 2:8: “Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel” (NIV).

There’s still a third strand. The gospel—the gospel of reconciliation—means that Gentiles (like you and me) are offered life with God, like Adam in the garden. No more court of the gentiles on the outermost part of the temple court. Gentiles are welcomed into the holy of holies, face to face with God himself. Paul says this also in Ephesians 3:6: “This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus” (NIV).

Can I remind you of another astounding passage that is meant to blow our minds about just how far back the good news of this gospel really goes? Paul says in Galatians 3:8: “Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’” (NIV)

This glorious strand—reconciliation of Jews and Gentiles—all made one through the one blessing—is gospel truth because of what God accomplished in Jesus Christ. And the hope for that, the promise for that, is present in Genesis 12!

OPEN OUR MINDS

And not only that, the strands that make up the gospel—the truths that explain and expound who this Jesus is, and all that God would accomplish through the Messiah Jesus—can be found throughout the whole narrative of Scripture. Just before Jesus ascended, he suddenly appeared walking with two disciples on the road to Emmaus. They struggled with believing the rumor that Jesus was alive, raised the third day. And Jesus says, “Why is it so hard for you to believe all that the prophets have spoken?...And beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself” (Luke 24:25-27). Just a few verses later, Jesus said to his special band of followers that there are things written about me in every section of the Old Testament: the law, the prophets, and the psalms (Luke 24:44).

And the next verse is even more important: “Then he opened their minds so they could understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45).

I pray that God will open our minds. Open our eyes. The gospel when rightly understood, when rightly preached, when believed and received, will open our eyes, open our minds, and when we read the Bible, you will start to see God reconciling the world in Jesus Christ on every page.

The gospel is simple, and yet it is vast, deep and wide.

FOUR QUESTIONS; GOSPEL ANSWERS

As I read Scripture, I see 4 basic questions. There are lots of stories in scripture and lots of themes in Scripture. But these 4 questions seem to be asked and answered through all of them.

Where did I come from?

What went wrong?

How will it be made right?

How do I participate?

The answer to the third question, “How will it be made right?” is the gospel. But don’t you see how the good news that God makes everything right in Jesus is the antidote to what went wrong, so you need the answer to 3 in order to fix question 2. And if you know that God will make everything right in Jesus because God planned the gospel before the foundations of the world, then that will inform how you answer question 1 (“Where did I come from?”). You won’t start with being found alone, born out of chaos into a harsh world; you’ll start with being made with love by a Creator who purposed from the beginning to redeem and restore us when we fail. And, of course, the answer to question 3—the gospel—demands a response. Knowing that God makes everything right in Jesus cries out for a response: “how can I be part of this? How will the blessings fall on me? What am I called to do, or become? How will the story become part of my life?” So, again, get the gospel right—get question 3 right, and everything else will fall into place.

Creation

One major theme is Creation.

Where did I come from? You were specially fashioned by a good and loving God, made in his image; just as you are body, soul, and Spirit, and yet 1 you, God is Father, Son, and Spirit, and yet 1 God. And that “good and loving” God is one of the strands Paul connects with “gospel.”

What went wrong? Human beings—made in God’s image to be God’s children—fell for the temptation to replace him; to no longer be servants but masters of ourselves. And we became infested with sin. So great is this sin that it separated us from God, and that alienation made every other relationship strange and fierce. Husband and wife would be at each other’s necks. Animals would fight to the death with each other. Nation would rise against nation—and all of that just an echo of our inner desire to be the master on the throne instead of God. And death would be the resulting curse for us all. That sense of sinfulness, our powerlessness to do anything about it, and even our antagonistic enemy-ness is one of the strands Paul reminds us of when he declares the gospel.

How will it be made right? The prophecy is given that the seed of the woman would crush the serpents head. The prophets spoke of a longing for “new creation” where the first heaven and first earth, full of degradation, war, pain, and death, would be replaced with new creation with God on the throne and all the world blessed because of it. But it would only come through the New Adam...through the perfect seed. Through the one who would face the temptation and not give in to the serpent but rather, remain servant to God. Then, who would bear the penalty of sin, who would take even death upon himself, reversing the curse, and offering the promise of new life.

This question—“how will it be made right?”—and the resulting answer is what Paul called “the gospel.”

How can I participate? Just as you didn’t earn your creation, you can’t earn your salvation. But you can receive it. You can experience the changed world, the changed relationships, the removal of all the walls that we have built up between us and others, between us and God—by becoming a new creation. And all who become new creations will experience life in the new creation when God makes all things new. You “receive” this truth—as Paul put it. “Receive” the gospel. Accept it! Behold, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation! You may be tempted to think too high of yourself and your way, which is powerless. You might be tempted to think too low of it all, and continue on your path of hopelessness. Repent and believe the gospel.

Covenant

Another major theme of the Bible is covenant (made with Adam, with Noah, with Abraham, then with Moses).

Where did I come from? If you are Jewish, you were chosen by a good and loving God, and adopted as sons. You didn’t show yourselves worthy of the covenant; nor did you win a lottery contest. God chose you. The promise to Abraham came before he left everything and fulfilled all that God commanded. The exodus—God rescuing his people from captivity—came before the giving of the Law on Mt. Sinai. Where did you come from? You were chosen, adopted, and created to be a people by a good and loving God before without anything to offer.

What went wrong? Pretty simple really. God made a deal with people who didn’t keep their end of the bargain. “If you heed and abide by my laws, I will bless you; if you don’t, I will curse you, or allow others to take you over—either as warning, or reprimanding, or simply as a result of your denial of the covenant.” I’m trying to help you, said God; these are for your benefit. Doing these things will keep you safe and help you flourish, and get to know me better and better. Failing to do these things will keep you from being truly human; and will cause you to fall right into the enemies hands. And humans under covenant did what was predictable. Constantly failing, and thus facing the consequences of what happens when we fail to keep covenant with God.

How will it be made right?¹ Two answers, both given in Scripture. God can’t stop loving—especially his own adopted children. Every time we fail, he provides a way of escape. Sometimes immediately; other times after we had time to learn our lesson. But His unfailing love is the real story. We fail to keep covenant, and God remains faithful to the covenant. He doesn’t let go. But there’s a problem. God has to be BOTH absolutely faithful to his word given in the covenant (with all the warnings of curses), and absolutely faithful to us. So how does he do it? Isaiah says we have a Lord of the

¹ I was greatly helped here by Tim Keller, *Center Church*, pp. 41-42.

covenant, but we also need a suffering servant of the covenant. And guess what? Jesus is God in the flesh—the Lord of the covenant himself—and by becoming the perfect servant who fulfills all the Mosaic law (Heb 8-10), but also the suffering servant of Isaiah 53, God made him who knew no sin to become sin; the Lord laid on him the iniquity of us all. Paul says the curse given in the law is applied to Jesus—cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree. And by taking the curse, becoming the curse of the covenant, He allows the blessings of the covenant to flow toward us (Gal 3:7-14). Now, that’s the Mosaic covenant. What about the Abraham covenant? Jesus fulfills that too. “Through your seed all I will bless all the nations” is true in Christ! For there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, we are all one in Christ Jesus. But this doesn’t mean covenant no longer applies to us. He says, “I’ll tell you what. I’ll write a new covenant, and this time I’ll write it not on tablets of stone, but on your heart. And I’ll put my own spirit within you to empower you to keep covenant. And I’ll move in and live in, with, and among you, to empower you to keep covenant. And even when you fail, I’ll say “look: I sent my own Son...the perfect Abraham; the perfect Moses; the perfect Israel; he kept covenant faithfully; and I now see you in him. His Spirit is now your spirit. And this idea—that God would renew or make new his covenant wrapped around not 613 laws, but one person—Jesus Christ—who is our eternal sacrifice; who is our great high priest keeping covenant on behalf of the nation, and given the Spirit to be empowered to live like adopted sons and daughters in relationship—this is what Paul calls “gospel.”

How do I participate? No one earned a spot to be in covenant (God chose them); so you can’t earn your salvation. But you can recognize this incredible fact: God chose you, too. God sacrificed himself on the altar, and now reigns himself as the intercessor, and wants YOU to be included among his people. In the cross, we see law and love combining, as Jesus allows us to enjoy the blessings of the covenant. Accept it. Say yes to it. Receive the reconciliation. The covenant that was once for only some, is now for all: “You are all sons of God by faith in Christ Jesus,” writes Paul. You might be tempted to think too high of your own abilities—your list of accomplishments and good deeds as your covenant loyalty card and your breastplate of righteousness; you may be tempted to think too little of it all, as if Christ’s sacrifice wasn’t for you. Repent, and believe the gospel.

Exile

Another key theme in Scripture is Exile.

Where did I come from? Well, you were made by a good and loving God, adopted as his children and called to be his covenant people. You were made in Eden by God; then You were rescued by God from Egypt, then led by God through the water, through the desert, and settled in the promised land. That is your story, and it’s all about God. The best thing God says about you is “you are a stubborn and stiffnecked people.” But God loved you and brought you to the promised land.

What went wrong? Well, we forgot. We are exiles from Eden, then exiles from the promised land. God gave warnings about forgetting. About losing touch with him as our one and only God. So we took new gods—including those we made with our own hands. And God—as he promised in the covenant—let us experience the consequence of our own devising. And we-God’s people-are in exile. Away from our homeland (God’s land). Unable to offer sacrifices in the temple because we can’t get to the Temple; and in some periods, there is no Temple. The law is lost; and we fear all hope is lost as well—all because of our sin.

How will it be made right? We know, don’t we? Jesus leaves heaven and experiences the life of an exile. He isn’t accepted in his hometown, and he doesn’t have a place to lay his head. When Jesus meets Moses and Elijah on the mount of transfiguration, do you know what Luke says they were talking about? “His exodus.” Oh yes. All that prefiguring in the Old Testament was just a foreshadowing of what God would do for us eternally. God—with outstretched arm, with a loving hand—will rescue you. Oh, he does it once (from Assyria), then again (from Babylon), and now that Persia, then Greece, then Rome have infiltrated God’s land, nothing seems quite right for the first century God-believer; we still feel like we are in Exile—in our land, but in the wrong dimension. But God, through his Messiah, comes to lead his people once again out of the Egypt of sin, through the water, through the desert, and into the promised land. The Messiah’s coming, death, and resurrection means our return from Exile. Now, says Paul, we don’t just inherit the land, but “the whole world.” All land is God’s land; no need for one temple in one place; for God’s people are God’s Temple; and as we go all over the world, we go as freed people, released from Exile, because God is our Aaron, he is our Moses, he is our pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. He is our rescuer, our redeemer, our liberator, and our friend. This, says Paul, is the gospel.

How can I participate? How can I experience freedom from exile? It’s not about moving to a new place (since we were in exile no matter where we went; we were exiled from God; banned from his garden), and it’s not about fighting well (since on our best day, our righteousness is filthy rags. No, we participate by accepting it. We Receive the gospel truth: Our exile is over. And we don’t have to run to the highest hill to climb the mountain of the Lord to find him; He is running to us, like a shepherd running after lost sheep. Receive this truth. Whether you think too high of your ability to heal the rift between you and God, or too low as if exile because of your sin is your inevitable fate. Repent, and believe the gospel.

When the whole world has turned their back on God, yet one man finds grace in the eyes of the Lord, and through one man he brings about a new world, we see the gospel. When Goliath stands opposed to God and his people, and God overcomes the enemy with a chosen child, showing strength through weakness, we see the gospel. When a wicked rotten city is running to hell faster than Jonah can even keep up, and they are

told of the wrath to come, they fall on their knees and beg for God’s mercy, and God rescues even them! It’s the gospel.

You can do this with countless themes, weaving together countless stories from cover to cover in Scripture and, if you look for it, you will the gospel. Peter can preach the gospel to the very people who crucified Christ, using stories he witnessed with his own eyes. Paul can preach the gospel to pagan philosophers in Athens, never once citing a Scripture, and yet proclaiming the Gospel in ways they could hear. Pray that God will open your minds, open your hearts to see on every page our unworthiness, no matter how hard we try; God’s unending love, no matter how hard we fight it or how far we run away from it, and the story of rescue through the Messiah that culminates in the death and resurrection of His own beloved Son.

Can you see how the gospel is not just a statement of faith. Not just a list of beliefs about something that happened 2,000 years ago. It’s the controlling narrative that makes sense of everything that’s ever happened, and everything that will happen. It is the constant flowing river underneath every commandment, every prophetic message, every story of conflict between good and evil, and every hope expressed to God by a people crying out for deliverance.

RECEIVE THE GOSPEL

And it will change your life. This morning, Jesus cries out for you to accept it. Receive it. We will dramatically, right now, this morning, display the story of the gospel. We will ask you to acknowledge who is the true Lord and Son of God—is it yourself, is it Caesar, or is it Jesus? We will then, in the presence of witnesses, re-enact creation, covenant, and return from exile. Just as the waters buried the old world, allowing a new world to be experienced by those kept safe in the ark, you and I can call upon Jesus Christ to be our ark of safety. Like him, in him, and through him, we can be submerged into the waters of chaos, but rise to be called new creation sons and daughters of God. And we join him in his work to multiply and replenish the earth by sowing seeds of the gospel, practicing reconciliation, and being servants of our Master. Just as blood and water are used in all the covenant rituals, we will baptize you in water, where you will come in contact with Christ’s blood. And you will be added—by Christ—to his people, adopted as his child, declared a Temple of God’s Spirit, and part of the gathered Temple known as the people of God. Only Jesus can save you. Receive the gospel!