

God's Dynamite

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[0 : 00] We're continuing our series in Romans chapter 1, and if you'd like to follow the reading, you'll find it on page 939 in our Visitor's Bibles.

Do turn with me to Romans chapter 1, and this week I'll read just verses 8 to 17. Romans chapter 1, verses 8 to 17.

So Paul the Apostle writes, First, I thank my God through Jesus Christ for all of you, because your faith is proclaimed in all the world.

For God is my witness, whom I serve with my spirit in the gospel of his Son, that without ceasing I mention you always in my prayers, asking that somehow, by God's will, I may now at last succeed in coming to you.

For I long to see you, that I may impart to you some spiritual gift to strengthen you, that is, that we may be mutually encouraged by each other's faith, both yours and mine.

[1 : 13] I want you to know, brothers, that I've often intended to come to you, but thus far have been prevented, in order that I may reap some harvest among you, as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.

I'm under obligation, both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish. So I'm eager to preach the gospel to you also, who are in Rome.

For I'm 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. For in it, the righteousness of God is revealed, from faith for faith.

As it is written, the righteous shall live by faith. And may God add his blessing to these words from the scriptures.

Let's bow our heads and we'll pray together. Dear God, our Father, we thank you with all our hearts that Paul the Apostle was raised up to you to be a preacher of this wonderful good news about Jesus Christ.

[2 : 28] We thank you so much that he was not ashamed of this good news, because he was convinced that it was and is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

And we thank you for the way in which this news about Christ has been preached for 20 centuries, all over the world, and continues to be preached and rejoiced in, and believed and accepted to the eternal benefit of those who accepted and received it.

And our prayer now, dear Father, is that you will give us open ears and tender hearts to hear your message. Whatever may have been in our minds over these past few hours today, even if it's painful and difficult things, we pray that you will clear them out and enable us to listen to your words and to hear your message afresh and to rejoice in it and to understand it.

For it is what we need above everything else. And we ask this in the name of our Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen. Well, friends, I would like this afternoon to speak on just one verse from our Bible reading, and that is verse 16.

I'll read it again to you, and as I read it, see if you can notice something unusual or odd about it. So here we go, 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.

[4 : 05] Now, don't you think that verse begins a little oddly? I might have imagined that the Apostle Paul would begin by saying, I now propose, friends, to explain the gospel to you, because it is the power of God for salvation.

Or even, I want you, dear brothers and sisters, to understand the gospel, because it is the power of God for salvation. But Paul instead uses this phrase with an odd twist and implication.

He says, I'm not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation. Now, why should he write like that? Think of Paul. He'd been a Christian leader when he wrote Romans for about the previous 20 years.

And with all that experience behind him, he knew that Christians were well capable of being ashamed of the gospel. He might even have been tempted to be ashamed of it himself at times. Now, you might say, ashamed of the gospel? Why should anybody be ashamed of such a wonderful thing? Well, I feel certain that if you really know what the gospel is and what the gospel does to people, then you also know the temptation to be ashamed of it.

[5 : 17] Let me try and explain. In the first place, Jesus Christ is scorned and ridiculed by very many people today. And nobody feels very comfortable aligning themselves closely with somebody who is scorned and ridiculed.

Now, if you say, how is it that Jesus is scorned and ridiculed? Let me give some examples. People will use his name commonly as a kind of swear word or expletive. And if you say to people, perhaps you've done this occasionally if somebody has said the name of Jesus in a loud way, maybe you've said to them, why do you use the name of Jesus like that?

They'd probably reply that they don't really mean anything by it. It's just a habit. It's just a way of speaking. But if you then say, well, why don't you use the name of your wife or your mother or your daughter to give vent to your feelings as a kind of expletive?

I think the reply would come, if it's an honest reply, the reply would be, well, that would be disrespectful to them. I love them too much. They're too precious to me. So people wouldn't use the names of their loved ones as an expletive because they care about those names and about the people who bear them.

But the name of Jesus and the one who bears it is scorned, a cheap name, a name worthless enough to use as a kind of swear word. Or again, the salvation that Jesus offers, this eternal salvation, is scorned.

[6 : 45] If you were to put on a sandwich board or carry a placard outside here in Buchanan Street and march up and down the street for some hours with the announcement on your sandwich board that Jesus saves, I guess you would be met with a certain amount of amusement and contempt.

Maybe an old friend of yours would see you and they might even cross the road and go into a shop so as to avoid contact with you and pretend that they hadn't seen you. Your message might make them shrink away because they don't want to know that Jesus saves.

So Jesus is scorned and we know it. And therefore, to stand on his side, to be aligned with him, to be counted amongst his followers, is to risk being scorned and ridiculed ourselves.

And so we are tempted to be ashamed of the gospel. But there's another reason why we might be tempted to be ashamed of the good news. And that is that the gospel is so fundamentally unflattering to the person who is not a Christian.

Now you can immediately see why by looking on to Romans 1 verse 18, where Paul begins to unfold the gospel. He says, For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who by their unrighteousness suppress the truth.

[8 : 07] Now that's where the gospel begins here in Romans, with the wrath of God being directed against all of us and the condemnation of the world's judge being directed against each of us.

Guilty is the verdict, in every case, without exception. Now that is an unflattering revelation, isn't it? And by nature, we simply do not like to have our natural pride blasted apart.

We love it when people tell us how good we are or how decent or how strong or kind. That sort of talk flatters us. It makes us feel comfortable. We feel better.

We feel built up. But the gospel floors us. It disturbs us more than anything we've encountered. And as we begin to feel the force of the gospel, the fabric of our life begins to crumble and disintegrate. We haven't a leg to stand on before God and we know it. Now when we know this about the gospel, and we know it if we've felt it in our own lives, when we know how appallingly painful and humiliating the first part of becoming a Christian is, it can make us shrink from telling the whole truth to other people.

[9 : 16] we know that if we start telling them something which completely undermines their pride and their self-sufficiency, we might risk their hostility.

We might even lose their friendship. If I boldly say to my friend, you need to be saved, my friend, you need to be put right with God, he may turn to me and say, well what right have you to say that?

Who are you to suggest that my life is all that bad? I can do without your pious advice. Thank you very much. And we don't like to risk that kind of response, do we? For all we know, we might lose that man's friendship forever.

So we're tempted to be ashamed of the gospel and we can easily be tempted to alter it a little bit, to make it a wee bit more palatable. Let me mention two ways in which we might be tempted to alter it. First, we might simply turn it into sentimental comfort. Are you in trouble? Are you in despair? Come to Jesus and you'll find the friend and companion that you need.

[10:20] Your troubles will lift, the dark clouds will soon be gone and you'll soon feel a very different and better and happier person. Now, that kind of truth is very palatable, isn't it?

It's never going to offend somebody who's not a Christian. It's rather like strawberry jam. It's sweet and tasty but it's not the gospel. And the point at which it fails to be the gospel is not so much in what it does say as in what it leaves out.

Of course, if a person is in trouble or in despair, the person to come to is Jesus. But what this sugary comfort message fails to say is that the troubled or despairing person is just as much under the condemnation of God as the careless blasphemer is or the outspoken atheist.

That kind of sentimental comfort is not going to save anybody. It may paper over a few cracks and make people feel a bit better for a short time but it totally fails to grapple with the big question of a man or woman's rebellion against God and their need to repent and be forgiven.

Then another way in which we might be tempted to improve upon the gospel to make it more palatable to people who are not Christians is to hold Jesus up as the great example of human life.

[11:39] This is what life can be like. Look at this wonderful man. What perfection of character. What strength. What sanity. What love. What unselfish devotion to the needs of other people.

What a man to model yourself on. Now when people hear Jesus portrayed in that kind of way they take it as a compliment because the implication is you can be like him if you'll just try a little bit harder.

put in some greater moral effort rise up and go after this great example of human life and people will have a go because they think they can do it. But as soon as you start telling people that Jesus is somebody that they cannot imitate a man whose perfection reveals not their moral potential but their moral impotence they realize that the gospel is not flattering them at all it's condemning them and they don't want it.

They say I'm not going to listen to any more of that thank you very much and they put the Bible down in a hurry. The gospel gives such a devastating analysis of the human condition it leaves room for not an inch of human pride rather like the surgeon's knife it has to hurt before it can heal and that's why we are tempted can be tempted to introduce these subtle changes into it which render it ineffective and inoffensive.

But of course an altered gospel is no gospel at all it has no power to heal or to save or to put right what is really wrong with the human condition.

[13:14] Now let's move on to the next part of verse 16 Why is Paul not ashamed of this gospel? Well he gives a very clear and straightforward reason because he says it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

Now let's notice something about that reason which may elude us at first glance. It was some years before I began to grasp the difference between the gospel and my testimony.

In the Christian circles where I grew up as a young Christian down in England a lot of emphasis was placed on a person being able to give their testimony and this is a good thing I'm not wanting to say otherwise but we need to understand the limitations of a personal testimony.

If I'm giving my testimony or you're giving your testimony necessarily we're talking about what God has done for us. So we'll say something like I came to see how much God had done for me.

I gave my life to the Lord and I began to experience a peace and a joy and a happiness which I'd never known before and my life began to change. I began to read the Bible and pray and enjoy being with other Christians and so on.

[14:26] Now that's the typical contents of what we might call a testimony. It's good it's true it's important but we need to understand that it's highly subjective and personal.

It's about me and about my experience and the danger is that it can easily be counterfeited. To give an example I remember some years ago I went visiting in the parish I was working in and I went to the house of a family who followed the Baha'i faith.

Now the Baha'i faith is a religion which tries to incorporate elements of quite a number of the world's major faiths and as I sat and talked the issues through with this husband and wife and their little daughter who was nine years old the little girl at one point piped up and she said to me but I know that our faith is true because I've experienced its power in my own life and then she proceeded to give me her Baha'i testimony and it was remarkably similar to a Christian's testimony she spoke about prayer and inner peace and how being a Baha'i was helping her to cope with some of the problems she was facing at school and so on and she was obviously sincere about it she was telling me the truth or to think of other examples you may meet a Muslim person who again would give you a testimony about how the faith of Islam has helped him or her to live a more peaceful or happy life now the danger is that a person who's not a Christian an unbeliever can go the rounds of all the different faiths and cults and religions he might come here to a Christian church one week he might go to the Jehovah's Witnesses

Kingdom Hall another week he might go to the mosque the following week he might even listen to somebody whose life has been transformed by the professional services of a psychoanalyst and he could find that all these different people are saying very much the same thing I'm much happier now I've discovered peace and personal liberty I get on with people much better I sleep better and so on so testimony whether it comes from a Christian or a non-Christian is necessarily subjective it's about me now in Romans 1.16 Paul could have written just look at the words again with me he could have written I'm not ashamed of the gospel because believing it has brought me such joy and peace and liberty but he doesn't say that he declines here to speak subjectively about himself he chooses rather to speak objectively about God and that in a nutshell is the difference between testimony and the gospel testimony has its place but it is subjective and it can easily be counterfeited the gospel on the other hand is unique and uncounterfeatable it cannot be imitated there is nothing like it no other faith or cult or group has anything comparable to the good news of a God who rescues people all the other faiths and cults at heart are about man rescuing himself and any attempt on those lines is bound to fail in the end so having noticed this difference between testimony and the gospel let's notice one or two other things about the gospel which Paul explains in verse 16 first he says it is the power of God for salvation and that friends is such an immense relief if I think of myself

I might picture myself as a non-Christian rather like a drowning man utterly helpless sinking dying at my last gasp ready to go under the waves and to be seen no more and then suddenly a great hand driven by sheer love plucks me out of the water and a voice says to me my beloved child I am your father you're not to perish as you feared you're to have everlasting life you're an heir of the kingdom of heaven you're Prince Edward you're going to reign with countless others in life eternally and then I might reply me father are you talking to me but I'm the scum of the earth look at the way I've lived I've lived selfishly egotistically what have I done to deserve this nothing my dear child nothing the only contribution that you've made to my salvation is your sin but Jesus has covered it dealt with it died for it made atonement at just the right time he died for you indeed for everyone who is ungodly and helpless now what do I feel like when I hear words like that

[19:08] I feel utter relief I know that I've no longer got to struggle against impossible odds to try to rescue myself I am rescued I can relax I'm safe I've been plucked from the jaws of hell by a God who cares passionately about me and has not been willing to see me perish the gospel is God's power it's what God does God's purpose God's activity in fact the whole of the Bible describes God's activity and purpose God made man and woman in the first place God came to them when they'd sinned and he clothed them himself and looked after them he then called Abraham as the prototype of the man who believes not in man but in God then God gave his people the law and it was God later who sent his prophets to call the people back to obedience as he spoke to them and it was God finally who at just the right time in human history sent his son to redeem and save a lost humanity and it is God who is still at work today in the world all evangelism all preaching of the good news is God's activity through evangelists

God is continuing to call people into his church and he will keep doing so until the end of the world and the consummation of his kingdom it's all God's activity from start to finish from A to Z what man does is to go wrong and get himself into an impossible mess and need to be rescued that's our contribution the gospel is the power of God to rescue those who are up to their necks isn't the Bible misunderstood so many people who have just a smattering of acquaintance with the Bible perhaps from Sunday school years ago or at their mother's knee think that the Bible is all about how to live a

good and moral and upright life a kind of moral code instructions for a good decent life a kind of expanded version of the school rules now of course the Bible contains and includes moral instruction and the gospel has very far reaching consequences in the realm of human behaviour but to think as so many folk do that the Bible is primarily a code for life and behaviour a rule book for man that's a tragic spiritual blindness the Bible is about what God has done and about what God is doing not primarily about what man ought to do it's the gospel of God it's the power of God glory to God praise to God that's the Bible's theme praise to the God who rescues the impotent helpless sinner who cannot help himself

I'm not ashamed of the gospel says Paul because it is God's power to bring rescue next what Paul emphasises next is who it is that this gospel saves now here's Paul's phrase it's the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes first the Jew and also the Gentile so do you see how only one category of persons is excluded from salvation that is unbelievers now this is the great tragedy it's the hard truth at the heart of the New Testament that there can be no salvation for those who refuse God's good news but it's not that that Paul is concerned to emphasise in this verse he does emphasise the sad plight of the unbeliever later on in Romans and in his other letters but here his concern is to emphasise the fact that salvation is for everyone who does believe everyone in other words the gospel does hold out hope for all people belief in it is all that is needed there are no other qualifications

Paul does not say that the gospel is just for those who've been sufficiently well behaved to qualify who've lived a good enough life no everyone who believes is saved and church history is full of stories of people who've been written off as hopeless by everyone who has known them and yet have been saved by the power of God people who for decades have lived a life as criminals swindlers drunkards drunkards brawlers blasphemers hopeless beyond redemption their friends would say and yet they've been rescued by the power of God they were beyond rescued by any human power or human agency but what is impossible with man is gloriously possible with God isn't this the marvel of the gospel the wonder of the good news nobody has been so sinful nobody has been so gripped by sin for so long that they cannot be saved by God think of that wicked man who found himself hanging on the cross next to Jesus that man was within hours of death and eternity his life had been a catalogue of crimes he was a wrongdoer up to the neck he wasn't being crucified for stealing a loaf of bread or scrumping a few apples he was a desperado he was a wicked man his mother had probably wept for him every night for twenty years and yet Jesus was able to turn to that man and say to him truly I tell you this day you will be with me in paradise no human power could have saved that man but the power of God did isn't this a reason for us not to be ashamed of this good news we know that there is as much hope for the most desperate unhappy vile natured wicked hearted individual as there is for those who apparently seem to be nice and respectable of course to God there is no difference at all between those two groups because both equally need to be rescued think of it in terms of your own friends and family is there somebody that you have given up on somebody about whom you say in your heart he is beyond rescue he is beyond redemption nothing can save him now if you say that you have forgotten what this gospel is it is the power of God you have no power to save that individual

I have no power to save him but God has power and perhaps I can dare to say this as well maybe the person that you have given up on is yourself you say in your heart you might not say it to anybody else but in your heart you say I am beyond everything I feel that I am at the end I am in despair I am a lost soul now if that is you could I ask you to do this when you get home later this evening make yourself a big cup of tea find a quiet place to sit down and open up your Bible at Romans 1 verse 16 at this verse and then dwell on these words and think about them friend the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes now that is the truth your past record your present state of mind all that is nothing to the Lord God all he asks of you is that you believe and when you are ready to believe nothing is simpler it is such a relief you simply say goodbye to all your self-justification all your self-righteousness you say to the Lord

[26 : 49] I am hopeless and helpless and utterly weak everything about me is wrong in myself I have no hope but Christ has taken away my sin and I trust him that is belief that is trust that brings salvation the gospel is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes let's bow our heads and we'll thank him for that how we thank you dear heavenly father for sending your son and we remember that he said I've not come to call the righteous but sinners the doctor doesn't come for the healthy but for those who are sick and we tell you dear father about our natural sickness our need our helplessness all that is vile and wretched in our nature and then we think of Jesus coming

and taking upon himself as he hung upon the cross everything that stained our lives and made them unacceptable and vile in your sight and he has borne it all away he's borne our sins to bring us forgiveness and we pray therefore dear father that you will open the hearts of every one of us who is here this afternoon to this good news and that you will give us the grace to trust that this gospel is your power for the salvation of everyone who believes and we ask it in Jesus name
Amen Amen you you