

1. A Saving Gospel

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Preacher: Bob Fyall

[0 : 00] God our Father, we praise you that we have a gospel. Good news to proclaim, good news to live by, good news to give us strength in the present and hope for the future. Good news about how in the person of your Son, you broke into time and space. You came into history and came into personal lives. We come with many needs.

We come from many backgrounds. All of us come with hopes and with fears. All of us come with joys and with sorrows.

Some of us come here regularly. Some of us may perhaps just happen to drop in. But for whatever reason we are here, we thank you that there is a gospel which is for all of us and indeed for everyone we know, for everyone we meet, for all our friends and families, our acquaintances and everyone we pass in the streets.

Father, we pray that in these moments you will speak to us. We know that you have things to say to us, things that we need to hear, things that if we give heed to them, think that will transform our lives, transform our outlook, transform our whole view of the world in the present.

And one day will bring us to that glorious new creation, which the death and resurrection and ascension and the coming again of our Lord Jesus Christ will bring about.

[1 : 40] And so we pray that as we read and listen to your word, that you will open our eyes. There is so much confusion in our minds and in the world. There is so much darkness and muddle.

We pray that you will open our eyes and clear our vision. We pray that you will cause our hearts to burn because these are not just ideas. These are not just theories.

These are facts and they are life-changing facts. And we pray, that if we do not yet know you, that you will send us out into the world, changed and transformed.

That if we do know you, that we will indeed go out more eager and more ready to proclaim that saving gospel, the gospel of a saviour's name.

We sing his glory, tell his worth. We give you our prayers, our thanks. In his name. Amen. Amen. Now, if you would turn in your Bibles, please, to page 961, and we are going to read the first few verses of this chapter, 1 Corinthians 15.

[2 : 55] Paul writing to the church in Corinth, and we will read the first 11 verses of chapter 15. And Paul writes, Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.

For I deliver to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins, in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures, that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.

Then he appeared to more than 500 brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, although some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

For I am the least of the apostles, unworthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. But by the grace of God, I am what I am, and his grace towards me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, for it was not I, but the grace of God, that is with me. Whether then it was I or thee, so we preach, and so you believed.

[4 : 39] Amen. That is the word of God, and may he bless it to us. Now, the title for this short series, which I have given to it, is After Easter, Always Easter.

You see, after Easter, it wasn't like a train passing through a station, which leaves stations behind it. After Easter, the whole of the world was transformed.

The whole of history was transformed. After the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, nothing would ever be the same again. No one would ever be the same again, because this is a message to which we need to respond.

This is a gospel. Not primarily a theory, not primarily a story, although this is a wonderful story, but a gospel. It is good news.

Good news to be proclaimed. Good news to be believed. Now, just a couple of things, before we look at these verses. How does this relate to the rest of the letter? We're breaking in very near the end of the letter.

[5 : 50] Now, Paul, in his second letter to the Corinthians, talks about his thorn in the flesh. Now, certainly one of the thorns in his flesh was the church in Corinth, who were a pretty miserable bunch.

Full of problems, loving celebrity, drunk with a celebrity culture, full of sexual sins, full of pride, full of arrogance, full of confidence in their own abilities, and often full of contempt for Paul, the apostle.

Now, most of these sins stem from an unbiblical view of reality. This unbiblical view of reality was something like this. The body, the created order, is evil, and the spirit is good.

Now, if you believe that, there are two different ways in which you can behave. You can say, well, if the body is evil and perishable, I can just do what I like with it. I can indulge it.

I can behave any way I like. Because it's just going to disappear. Or else, you can imagine that you are, when the end of the world comes, when Christ returns, you're simply going to be a glorified spirit.

[7 : 06] Paul says, no, this is not the truth. The truth is that the body matters. God made the body. We'll be seeing this in future weeks.

Because God made the body, it's for the Lord, as he says in an earlier chapter. Therefore, you can neither, you can neither indulge it, behave any way you like.

It's not your body. It's not my body, after all. It belongs to the Lord. It's for the Lord. And when the last day comes, if you're going to be resurrected, it's going to be in a body.

Not some disembodied spirit. The earliest Christian creeds say, I believe in the resurrection of the body. Not, I believe in the immortality of the spirit.

And we'll come to that in particularly next week and the week after that. And the other thing is this.

This letter is one of the earliest letters to be written in the New Testament.

[8 : 05] This is the kind of way Christians were preaching, were talking about the gospel. Some 15 or 20 years after the great saving events took place. After Jesus died, rose again and descended into heaven some 15, 20 years later.

This is the kind of message that was being proclaimed. These are the words he uses. The gospel, the gospel which I preach to you. The gospel I received.

The gospel in which you stand and which saves you. Notice he received it. It wasn't made up, if you like. It was sent down. It was a message from heaven.

And you also received it. Paul received it first, of course, from Ananias, whom he met after his conversion on the Damascus Road. But then also and primarily from the Lord himself.

So three things then. What is it about this saving gospel? First of all, there are verifiable facts. These are facts which are of first importance.

[9 : 11] And there are three facts. He died, he was buried, and he was raised from the dead. So the first thing is it's a historical reality.

It's not a wonderful idea. It's not even just an experience. An old hymn that was sung a lot in the past was, I serve a living saviour.

He's in the world today. And the chorus of that says, You ask me how I know he lives. He lives within my heart. That's not good enough. I need to know that not only does he live within my heart, but he lives and reigns in heaven and earth.

He died, he was raised, and he is coming again. It's alright, he lives in my heart, when my heart is rejoicing. What about when my heart is grieving? What about when my heart is broken?

What about when my heart is sad? It's not much to hang on to to say he lives within my heart. I hope he does live within your heart.

[10 : 16] I hope you do know him and love him and that he does live within your heart. But ultimately, we need to know that he lives and reigns in heaven and earth. So you've got three actual events.

Christ died. The Messiah gave his life. He was buried. I mean, think of the bleakness and the darkness there. Body placed in the tomb.

The stone rolled over the entrance to that tomb. And think of those endless, endless hours as people waited and wondered and hoped and feared.

We talk about Good Friday. We talk about Easter Sunday. We've no name for the Saturday, do we? The day in between. The day when the hopes and fears and doubts and all kinds of worry and dread must have pressed in on Jesus' followers.

And then comes another event. On the third day. Notice the little detail there which shows that this is a historical fact. Not a while after he died, he was placed in the grave.

[11 : 25] Then a while after that the Easter faith rose in the hearts of the disciples. They felt he was alive. They felt better. The thing of the sort. The point is on the third day he was raised and he was seen by an abundance of witnesses.

On one occasion five hundred brothers at one time. Many of whom are still alive. Paul is saying go and ask people. They saw him. And then you can ask me says Paul.

Last of all to me. Paul is the last of the apostles to be called. Paul the final apostle. Historical reality and an early account of the historical reality.

Remember when Paul wrote those words? None of the four gospels had been written. The wonderful stories that each of them tell. Each from their own point of view. But each with this historical reality died.

He was buried and on the third day he rose again. But that's not enough in itself. Facts in themselves don't amount to a gospel and there is a life changing interpretation.

[12 : 35] Not just that Christ died because you could add various words to that. Some people think Christ died as a martyr. As a martyr to a cause. Some think some think he died as a victim.

Various reasons you could give for Christ dying. But no says Paul Christ died for our sins. And that's what turns the fact of the death of Christ into a gospel.

Paul is later to say in his letter to the Romans that Christ was delivered up for our sins and raised for our justification. So there is an interpretation here.

And this interpretation is brought out by some of the things that Paul says. In a moment or two we're going to come to the phrase in accordance with the scriptures.

This wasn't just something that happened. This has been planned all through the history of God's dealings with people. This is what I call an hourglass passage. You know when the kind of passage where events focus on one particular little spot and then flowed again from it.

[13 : 44] These great saving events dying, rising again, dying, buried and rising again. All of human history hangs on those events.

And you see these facts lead to change, transformation. If he died for our sins then that means that our sins can be forgiven. If he died for our sins that means we have to make a decision about him. It's not just another fact in our history. Julius Caesar invaded Britain. You don't need to make a decision about that fact.

Obviously in one sense it was historically important because the history of Britain in a sense flows from that. But the fact that Julius Caesar invaded Britain is not something on which you have to make a personal decision which will influence the rest of your lives.

But this is different. And notice the words he uses in verse 2. Unless you believed in vain and that word is going to be repeated at the very end of the chapter.

[14 : 52] Your labour is not in vain. So you see the two bookends of the chapter if you like are these words not in vain. In other words this is not something that failed.

Now obviously it did look as if it failed when Jesus hung on that cross. When Jesus died forsaken lonely abandoned by friends mocked by enemies it seemed he had failed.

It seemed in fact it was in vain. But it wasn't in vain and Paul illustrates that from his own experience. Verse 9 I am the least of the apostles unworthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God but by the grace of God I am what I am and his grace towards me once again the word was not in vain.

Paul was saying look it worked in my life and look at the kind of man I was. I wasn't the kind of person who was sympathetic to the gospel indeed I was actively persecuting it and that's what this gospel has ever since said to every human being.

This gospel can change your life. This gospel can transform your life just as it transformed Paul's and that was shown by verse 10 he worked harder than any of them.

[16:14] Notice of course Paul is not saying I worked hard to gain my salvation. Salvation was a gift. What it's saying is that he worked hard because he was changed because his gratitude towards God's grace.

So we've got verifiable facts. We've got transforming these facts into a gospel.

And thirdly we have unmistakable evidence. How do we know about these things? Look at verse 3. I deliver to you as a first important that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures. And then he was buried raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures. In other words if you want to find out about these events if you want to understand these events if you want your life to be changed by these events then you have to look into the scriptures.

Remember I said to you that 1 Corinthians is written very early on in the history of the Christian church. Paul here is talking about the Old Testament. Paul is talking about the books from Genesis to Malachi rather like what the risen Lord did on the road to Emmaus beginning with Moses and all the prophets.

[17:42] He opened them in all the scriptures for things concerning himself and what did he tell them about the scriptures? He said Christ suffered and then entered into his glory.

Different words from Christ died, Christ was buried and Christ was raised again but the same idea. A rather silly little rhyme which is both rotten poetry and rotten theology.

So shut your Bibles up and tell us how the Christ you speak about is living now. Now the one thing I can tell you for certain is if you shut your Bibles up you are never going to be able to tell anybody how the Christ you speak about is living now.

If you're going to tell how the Christ you speak about is living now you've got to open your Bibles up because that's where you'll discover the unmistakable evidence that he lives not just in your heart but he lives and reigns.

It's the Bible that's our evidence. Jesus loves me. This I know. How do I know it? Because the Bible tells me so. Jesus died, Jesus was buried, Jesus was raised from the dead.

[18:53] How do I know? The same reason, because the Bible tells me so. According to the scriptures, what Paul means really is this is the pattern of the whole Bible.

The whole of the Old Testament weaves this pattern of death and resurrection. Adam and Eve sentenced to death and the whole human race sentenced to death with them.

The day you eat the tree you will die. what accompanies that? The descendant of the woman will crush the head of the serpent. Israel, Abraham called and Abraham's descendants find themselves in Egypt and in the death if you like of the captivity in Egypt.

But then as it were they are raised from the dead again as the Lord leads them out of Egypt, brings them the promised land. and then after many centuries have passed they take them to another death in Babylon and God brings them back and all the way through there is this pattern of death and resurrection.

There is guarantee that God is at work. But until Christ comes, until he dies and rises again, people only saw this dimly, but now they see through the events that happened that this, that the God of resurrection has finally and fully and decisively worked.

[20:30] This is the guarantee of the new age, the guarantee of the new creation. This is also the pattern for our proclamation of the gospel.

We need to preach the Christ who died, the Christ who was buried, the Christ who rose again.

Christ will return on the last day to judge the living and the dead and to usher in the new creation.

That's the Christ we need to preach. John Wesley said, I offered Christ to them. And we offer this Christ who is the answer to the greatest and the most intractable problem that faces us all.

That is the problem of death. over all our lives hangs the shadow of death, that grim frontier post against which all our hopes, all our aspirations, all our achievements run into the buffers.

That is what the gospel is. As we finish, we have a gospel to proclaim. It's a gospel which is based on historical fact, flows from these events that actually happened.

[21:43] But it's a gospel for which there is an unmistakable evidence, and it's a gospel which transforms people. That's why Paul, both the beginning and the end of the chapter, says it's not in vain.

That's the message of this great chapter. After Easter, always Easter. Let's pray. God our Father, we praise you for this saving gospel.

The gospel proclaimed so fully in scripture, proclaimed by the apostles and those who heard them. That gospel passed down to us through the centuries, and that gospel which is the gospel on which we can build our lives.

praise each one of us may leave here like those on the Emmaus road, with burning hearts and open eyes, and with that saving gospel in our minds, in our hearts, and in our lives.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.