

What is the Gospel?

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Date: 08 February 2017

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[0 : 0 0] I'm sorry that I'm not Josh Johnson, who was meant to be speaking today, but Josh has had to go over to Northern Ireland because his grandmother died very suddenly. So he's over at the funeral, and so I'm stepping in today.

So if it's not your pleasure, well, at least it's my privilege to be here. We're going to read together a few verses from the beginning of Paul's great letter to the Romans, Romans chapter 1.

And if you have the blue Bible there, I think it's page 939. Let's just pray, shall we, as we come to God's word.

Heavenly Father, we thank you that in the midst of a busy life and a busy week, we can quieten our minds and hearts before you and come to the place where we know that amidst all the deceit, all the lies, all the confusion, all the ignorance of this world, we can find truth, absolute truth, to be trusted and therefore to be obeyed.

Your word which pierces through the darkness to give us light and knowledge of you and the wonderful news of your great grace and mercy to us in Jesus Christ, your Son.

[1 : 2 4] So help us, Lord, open our eyes, we pray. Open the eyes of our hearts that one might hear and heed all that you have to say to us this day.

And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Romans 1 then at verse 1. 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 or appointed 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.

Well, we're going right back to basics, absolute basics today, and asking the question, what is the gospel?

What is the gospel? There are many, many misconceptions about that abroad in the world today, even in the professing church. You'll hear people say things like this. Well, the gospel is about helping the poor.

[2 : 5 2] The gospel is about being loving. The gospel is about, well, the good news that whichever God you worship, at the end of the day, all these different religions lead us to the same God.

That's the sort of thing you'll hear, isn't it, in the street or among perhaps your friends, perhaps your workmates today. I wonder what you would answer. Not that, I hope. But here are some common evangelical answers that I've heard.

The gospel is the way of salvation. The gospel is believing Jesus is your Savior. The gospel is being forgiven. And that's a lot better than the others, isn't it?

And there is certainly some glorious truth in those statements. But none of these things come near to what the Bible really considers the gospel to be.

In fact, the gospel, as the New Testament describes it, isn't something about us at all. It's not about our sins. It's not even about our salvation. Now, the gospel is a message.

[3 : 55] It's a great announcement about Jesus Christ. That's how the apostle Paul certainly spoke, as we've read here. In fact, in an even pithier summary, he writes to Timothy and says this, Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, offspring of David, as proclaimed in my gospel.

You see, the gospel is first and foremost, the great declaration about Jesus Christ. Look down at this passage we've just read here in Romans chapter 1.

Paul says here he has been set apart for the gospel of God, verse 1, concerning his son. What is the message about God's son, Jesus? Well, it's summed up there at the end of verse 4.

Can you see? Jesus is the Christ, that is, he's the Messiah of Israel, as promised, and he is our Lord. He is the promised great king. He is the ruler, therefore, of this whole world.

And that is the gospel, promised in the Old Testament and fulfilled and proclaimed in the New Testament witness to the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

[5 : 05] That's what the New Testament tells us. Now, it's so important for us to see that. Look at verse 2. Jesus, we're told, was descended from David, that is, the great anointed king of Israel, according to the flesh.

That's who he was. That's the gospel, if you like, from the Old Testament point of view. The great son of David, who was promised to come and would rule the whole of the world from the throne of David.

And the gospel, you see, the news that is announced by the New Testament apostles is that that promise has been fulfilled. It's been fulfilled uniquely in the resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth from the dead.

Look at verse 4. His resurrection declares or it appoints Jesus as the son of God with power. David and Solomon and their descendants of old, the kings of Israel, they were called God's sons.

They would rule God's people on earth on God's behalf. But now Jesus is appointed at last as the son of God with power because he is the Messiah.

[6 : 17] He is the promised Christ. He is the one who will rule forever because he will live forever. Death will no longer ever destroy the rule of this son of David.

So the resurrection of Jesus, in that sense, is the gospel. It's the news. It's the announcement that all the promises of the Old Testament prophets about God's great coming king, that they are fulfilled in this man in history.

That's the gospel according to the apostle Paul. Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David. Jesus is the Christ.

He is our Lord. In fact, he is the Lord and king of all this world. And the rest of Paul's letter to the Romans here explains what that news means, what impact it has for this whole world.

Not only does the gospel declare Christ's rule, his lordship. If you look down at verse 17, it says the gospel reveals his righteousness to the world.

[7 : 26] And it's his instrument of salvation. It's the power of God for salvation from the coming judgment, which is now announced for the world with Jesus coming. Look at verses 17 and 18.

For in it, in the gospel, the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith. Verse 18, for the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness.

The gospel reveals God's righteousness, but also his coming wrath. And you see, we need to take that second thing very, very seriously, as Paul does for most of the rest of the next three chapters in this letter.

The coming wrath of God in judgment. Why is that so important? Well, because he says the gospel announces the coming at last of God's judgment on the world.

And so the gospel message must be engaged very, very seriously. Because judgment day is upon us. So I want us to focus particularly on this apostolic proclamation of the gospel in the New Testament, but also, without forgetting, the prophetic promise of the gospel, which precedes it in the Old Testament.

[8 : 42] So first, then, the apostolic proclamation of the gospel, which is that Jesus is the appointed judge of all mankind without exception.

That's what Paul's words in Romans 1 here mean. But in case you want corroboration, let's turn back a few pages to Acts chapter 2, page 910.

Here we've got Peter preaching on the day of Pentecost, and he focuses all his preaching on this fulfillment that is proclaimed in the resurrection of Jesus.

So in verse 32 of Acts chapter 2, page 910, you'll see that Peter says that Jesus was raised and that they were witnesses of his resurrection.

And that's why he says down there in verse 36, that it is therefore certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, the Messiah and David's line, the king of all the world.

[9 : 45] And what that means, according to all the Old Testament promises, is that the great and awesome day of the Lord that everyone had been waiting for has now begun.

It means the kingdom of God is here. And what that means is that judgment is here, because God the judge has come to judge the world.

Notice Peter's quotations all through here from the Old Testament. You can see it in your Bibles in verse 16 and following. He's quoting that big bit from the prophet Joel. And can you see it's all about judgment day, verse 20.

The great and magnificent day, the day of fire, the day of blood. When only the Lord can save you. You have to call on his name to be saved in that judgment.

And then look down to verse 25 and following. That's all quoted from Psalm 16, which if you read it, it's all about God's Holy One. Here, verse 27, who will conquer death.

[10 : 42] There will be no corruption of his body in the grave. And then verse 35, he quotes again from the Psalms, from Psalm 110, where the Messiah, the exalted Son of God, is exalted to his throne of judgment, from which he will make all his enemies his footstool.

He will judge all the world. And verse 36, again, you see it refers to him as being both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified but has now been risen.

Again, that's echoing Psalm 2, where the Son of God is exalted and becomes the judge over all the nations, including its kings, its rulers, and all.

So can you see the apostolic preaching of the gospel is very clear. It's very plain. And Jesus is risen, and therefore Jesus is the ruler of all the world, and therefore Jesus will return to judge the whole earth.

You might call that the three R's of the gospel, if you like. Jesus is risen, Jesus rules, and Jesus shall return. The gospel, you see, announces the beginning of the last days, the day of the Lord.

[11 : 59] And it means that judgment has become. And that will certainly be brought to completion at the return of Jesus. Now, Peter's hearers very clearly got it, didn't they?

Look at verse 37. It says, They were cut to the heart, and they cried out, What shall we do in the light of this extraordinary news? And Peter says, Repent. You must repent and turn from your sins, or you will face ruin.

Jesus is risen. He rules now. He returns to judge the whole earth, and so you must repent now. And you must bow to his sovereign lordship, for he is Lord and Christ.

Now, that was exactly the gospel that John the Baptist announced, first in the desert before Jesus, that Jesus himself announced at the beginning of his own ministry. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.

Those were Jesus' first public words. Judgment is imminent, is what he's saying. Listen to John the Baptist in Luke's Gospel, chapter 3. Listen to what he says about the Jesus who is to come.

[13 : 06] His winnowing fork is in his hand, and the chaff he will burn with fire. That's an unmistakable announcement of judgment coming, isn't it?

Which tells us, by the way, that in fact translating the word gospel as good news isn't necessarily a correct translation, is it? Listen to what Luke says about John the Baptist preaching about the chaff being burnt with fire.

Thus he preached the good news to the people, is what our translation of the Bible says. But that wasn't good news for all people, was it? It was certainly news. It was very bad news.

That's why the command was not to rejoice, but to repent. For even now, said John, the axe is laid at the root of the tree, and every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

So bear fruit in keeping with real repentance. It was gospel that he was proclaiming to them.

[14 : 11] That was the apostolic preaching of the gospel, always. Proclaiming the kingdom of God has come, the lordship of Jesus as the Christ, and therefore the king and the judge of the whole earth.

If you read through the whole of the book of Acts, if you read all the sermons later on, you'll see that I'm speaking the truth. That's why the resurrection of Jesus was so absolutely central to the apostolic preaching of the gospel.

Christians are sometimes confused about this. You know, the resurrection is nothing to do with proving that Jesus is God. The apostles never referred to the resurrection in that way. Not at all.

No. The apostles held it central because what it does prove is that all the promises of the scriptures are fulfilled in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, this man.

That this Jesus is God's king and judge, and in him the kingdom has come. And therefore now, you see, he says, all over the world, not just the Jews, but the entire Gentile nation, the whole world must submit to the unique and the universal authority of Jesus.

[15 : 24] That's why in Acts chapter 17, when Paul was preaching, remember, to all the clever philosophers in Athens, and he comes to the climax of his message and says, all the ignorance, it's quite ironic, isn't it, speaking to all these PhD holders, all your ignorance in the past, God overlooked, but not any longer.

Why? Because Jesus is risen. And now, says Paul, God commands all people everywhere to repent because he has fixed the day for judgment when he will judge the world by the man he has appointed.

And of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead. That's the constant apostolic proclamation of the gospel.

This is the gospel in the New Testament. God's judgment and his judge are declared in the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead. That's why the resurrection is so, so important.

Turn to one more reference, just so I can absolutely convince you. A few pages further on to Acts chapter 10. And let's look at verses 42 and 43. Page 919.

[16 : 35] You may remember the story, some of you. Peter is in the household of Cornelius, the Roman soldier. And Cornelius is sent for him. And if you look at verse 33, it says that he asks Peter to tell them exactly what the Lord Jesus commanded you to proclaim.

And so Peter does in verses 37 to 41. He tells about Jesus' life, about his death, about his resurrection, which was witnessed, he says, by himself and by others.

And in verse 42, he says that Jesus, look at verse 42, Jesus commanded us to preach to the people about the coming judgment, you see?

He is the one appointed by God to be the judge of the living and the dead. That is the apostolic message, the gospel Jesus commanded them to preach wherever they went.

That is the New Testament gospel. There is wrath to come because now at last, judgment day for the whole world is imminent.

[17 : 46] And Jesus is the judge of all people without exception. But of course, alongside that, that new message, which was absolutely at the heart of the apostolic preaching of the gospel, Jesus' own command, alongside that, Peter makes clear here there's a very old message.

Look at the next verse, verse 43. The prophetic promise of the gospel. That Jesus is also the appointed Savior of all who believe without distinction.

To him, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. Jesus is risen.

He does rule this world. He shall return to judge the whole world. But, until the very last of these last days, when he does return, the Bible tells us he is still the rescuer.

He is here to save from the wrath to come. To bring forgiveness now before that day of judgment. See, the gospel is a message about real salvation precisely because it is a message about real judgment to come.

[19 : 08] It promises salvation from the wrath that is still to come. And for the New Testament, you know, salvation, for Jesus and his apostles, salvation is still a future thing.

Nobody has yet been saved from the wrath of God because the day of judgment is not yet fully upon us. That's why Paul says to the Philippians, we await a Savior from heaven.

That's why he says to the Thessalonians that he delivers us from the wrath that is to come. That's why Paul says in Romans 5, verse 9, we shall be saved from the wrath of God in the future having been justified now already by his blood.

And we can be rescued now in the present from what Jesus' coming will bring to this world in the future because of what is a coming accomplished when he first came in the past.

But you see, you receive forgiveness, you receive Jesus' rescue now only, only by submission, by real surrender to his lordship, to the rule of the risen Christ who is the judge.

[20 : 22] That's what repentance means, isn't it? According to Jesus, according to the apostles. Repentance is not accepting Christ as your Savior as though he was somehow rather hopelessly knocking at the door outside and saying, please, please, give me a look-in in your life.

No. Repentance is not a decision for Christ as if by deciding for Jesus we were doing him a big favor and letting him into our life.

No, no, no, no. Not at all. The gospel is a command of absolute power and authority demanding that all people everywhere bow to the authority, the mastery, the lordship of Jesus Christ.

It is, of course it is, a great offer of grace and mercy, wonderful grace, forgiving mercy, more than we could ever deserve, certainly more than we could ever, ever merit.

But it is also the sovereign command of the Lord of heaven and earth. And that's the message that begins and ends this great letter to the Romans.

[21 : 27] Romans 1 verse 5, Paul said there that his apostleship is in order to call all the nations to the obedience of faith, to bow the knee to the Lord of heaven.

Chapter 16, at the end again he calls his gospel the command of the eternal God to bring about the obedience of faith. So what is the gospel?

Well, these two verses here in Acts 10, 42 and 43, three are just a wonderful summary, aren't they, that tell us. The resurrection declares with unmistakable power that the promise of all the scriptures is true and that the promise of all the scriptures is fulfilled.

That Jesus Christ is the appointed judge of all people without exception. and that Jesus is the appointed savior for all who believe, all without distinction, Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female.

That is all who will bow to his mastery, to his lordship. Submit, surrender, everything to the rule of the one who is the lord of heaven and earth.

[22 : 44] In other words, to all who repent and who bear fruit in keeping with real repentance. Well then, if that is what the gospel really is, let me just state three fairly obvious implications for the message that we, as the church of Jesus, must carry to the world today.

First, we have a unique message and a universal message that Jesus alone is the judge and lord of all people. You see, the wrath to come according to Jesus is real and terrible.

And the judgment of God will be absolutely universal. There can be absolutely no escaping that judgment. And the only way through that judgment is if the judge is also your savior.

Only he can pronounce the verdict. Only he can possibly acquit. And only he will ever pronounce a verdict on every single person who's lived in this world.

That's why Peter said there is no other name under heaven by which we may be saved. And so, friends, we must proclaim a unique savior, Jesus alone.

[24 : 08] And we must proclaim him universally to all, all peoples without distinction, whatever their background, whatever their religion, their culture, or anything. second, we must have an uncut message.

That is, Jesus alone is Lord and judge of all. That means you cannot have Jesus Christ as your savior without submitting to his lordship, without surrendering to his soul mastery.

You must confess, says Paul, that Jesus is Lord in order to be saved. So, you see, to proclaim Jesus as a savior alone is not a word that can save.

In other words, a gospel that does not command repentance is no gospel at all. It's not the gospel of Jesus Christ. He is our Lord and our judge.

And so, we must bow to his master. We must become disciples, taught to obey everything that he commanded the apostles to teach us. There's no cheap grace anywhere in the New Testament.

[25 : 11] Don't say to me, Lord, Lord, said Jesus, and not do what I, your Lord, command you to do. And the church must proclaim an uncut message.

Only the whole biblical gospel of the lordship of Jesus is a true gospel at all. And finally, we must surely have an urgent message.

That Jesus alone is Lord and judge of all. And that the judgment and the wrath to come is real. And it will be terrible. And so, what that means, of course, is it is the most unloving thing in this whole world to fail to proclaim the truth and the whole truth about Jesus.

That must be so. He is risen. He rules. He will return to judge us all. And so, you must repent now before it's too late.

That's the message that we've been told to carry to the world. With the great assurance that when you do, you will find that he is also the great rescuer.

[26 : 21] To him, all the prophets bear witness that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name. What is the gospel?

That's the gospel. gospel. The uncut, unique, and universal, and urgent word of God to every person in this world today, to every one of us in the room today.

So, the question for every one of us is, what is our response? What's our response? What do we do personally with this message? And what are we doing to take it to the world?

Amen. Let's pray together. Heavenly Father, we thank you for the clarity of your word that leaves us in no doubt that the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ proclaims him as the ruler, as the judge of all people without exception.

How we praise you that all the scriptures also testify that he is the Savior, who alone can bring and longs to bring forgiveness of sins.

[27 : 35] So, may that message live in our hearts and on our lips we pray. In Jesus' name, Amen.