

The Centre and Content of the Gospel

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- [0 : 00] Well, friends, let's pray together. Father, please, we pray, help us today as we look at these scriptures, help us to understand them.
- And please transform us by them through the work of your spirit. This we pray in Jesus name. Amen. Amen. Friends, I want to begin this Bible talk tonight with a word of explanation accompanied by a word of warning.
- First, the word of explanation. I've now been here as your pastor teacher for a little over 16 months, I think now. And I spent most of that time just getting to know you, trying to find out the various activities associated with church, trying to work out what goes on here and trying to survive much of the time as well.
- However, over the past four or five months, I've turned my mind to thinking about our future as a church. And as I've done this, I thought that the best place to start was to start with what God wants us to do.
- And the best place to start finding out what God wants us to do is to prayerfully read the scriptures. So that's what I did for a period of a couple of months. I spent a couple of months reading the whole of the New Testament.
- [1 : 20] And as I did so, I asked myself four questions. Each of the questions has sub questions. And the four major questions are these. What is the gospel and the sub question?
- And what does gospel ministry look like? Two, what is the church? And sub question, what is the church all about? Three, what is a shepherd or pastor?
- And sub question, what is their role? And four, what is worship and sub question, what does it actually look like? Now, I've never before done this exercise from first principles, I am embarrassed to say.
- But it's been an incredible exercise. And I have made some incredible discoveries. And these discoveries have shaped my thinking. And they're shaping now how I strategically think before God about our future as a church.
- And I've concluded that the most important question for us is the first question. That is, what is the gospel and what does gospel ministry look like?
- [2 : 23] So my next six Bible talks are really an exploration of this very question. I've already preached these talks in the morning services.
- But I'm going to preach them here now so that we can be sure that all of our congregations have sort of gone through this same process of thinking and exploring the scriptures with me.
- So in these talks, what we're going to do is look at what is the gospel? We're going to try and understand the big picture of what God is doing in his world through the gospel.
- And I want these talks that we look at today to be the foundation or these next six weeks or so to be the foundation of our thinking about ourselves and the task we have as God's people before God.
- So there's the word of explanation. Now for the word of warning. The word of warning is that this first Bible talk is fairly packed with content.

[3 : 20] In other words, I am going to get you to be doing some hard work. You'll need to concentrate well with solid work to do. And I want you to stick with me this evening because it's very important stuff.

And I want us to shape our life together. I want us to really think and interact with each other. I want it to transform our minds, our hearts, our life, our congregational life and even our life to the outside world.

So that in mind, I'm going to pray again. So please join me in prayer. Our God and Father, please help us this evening to pay close attention to your word.

Please help us to understand what you are doing in your world. Please shape us by your word. Please be at work among us by your spirit. Please use these Bible talks to point us towards your son and also use them to transform our life together.

And we pray this for the sake and glory of Jesus and in his name. Amen. Friends, since this series of talks is about the gospel, we really need to grapple with what that term, the gospel, is all about.

[4 : 33] And since this term is critical in our passage today, we need to really understand what it means, not only for the series of talks, but for this passage. So the way I want to introduce the meaning of the word gospel by telling you two stories.

Now, the first story comes from the Greek speaking world of the first century BC. It was a time when the Roman world was torn apart. It was torn apart by war. And from this time, we have an inscription that has traveled down to us.

It was found in Praene, between Ephesus and Miletus on the west coast of Roman Asia. It is dated 29 BC. And it records the birth of the Emperor Augustus.

Now, in order to understand this inscription, you need to know that a Roman emperor was viewed as divine. That is, everyone thought that a Roman emperor was God or a god.

And so the words of the inscription read like this. Now, I've translated the word literally.

[5 : 42] That's what is actually said. In the Greek speaking world, the word gospel meant glad tidings, good news. So can you hear it again? The birthday of the God marked for the world the beginning of the great news through his coming.

It was a word that you often used at an emperor's birth, at his coming of age, at his enthronement. Even in his speeches, even his speeches and decrees were declared to be gospel.

Such events gave people hope. You see, the birth of an emperor was a great sign of great hope, of new starts. They heralded the possible fulfillment of long hoped for happiness and peace, realized the possibility of a new start, the end of war, the creating of order.

The birthday of the emperor was great and, for some, good news. Declaring the birth of an emperor was the declaration of a gospel of great, glorious news, filled with the possibility of good and great things.

So that's how the Greek speaking world of Roman politics used the word gospel. Now, let me tell you how the Old Testament used the word. You see, the New Testament writers, well, they spoke the Greek language, many of them, all of them to some extent.

[6 : 59] And they were influenced, though, not only by the Greek speaking world and how it used the word, but particularly by the Old Testament and the Old Testament prophets and the Old Testament writers.

And their thought was largely shaped by the Old Testament. The Bible that they used was largely a Greek version of the Hebrew Old Testament.

And so when they used the word gospel, they were not only formed by ancient Greek speakers and how they used the term, but they were also formed by the Bible and how it used the term.

So with that in mind, let me tell you a bit of how the Old Testament used the term gospel. Now, the first thing to say is that it doesn't use the form, the feminine form, sorry, the masculine form that we use or the neuter form that we use in the New Testament, use the feminine form.

And it tends to perform the verbal form of the word. However, just to show you how it's used, you might like to look with me at 2 Samuel chapter 19 or 18. We're going to look at.

[7 : 59] So 2 Samuel 16 through to 19. And I want to tell you just a bit about the story here. King David's eldest son living, he was named Absalom. And David deeply loved this handsome, gifted young son.

Absalom, though, staged a palace coup against his father. And he caused David to flee the palace and his city. He raped David's concubines on the rooftop of David's palace before all Israel.

Absalom and his men waged war against David's men. And then in the thick of battle, Absalom was cornered and he was killed. And David's commander in chief at this time is a man called Joab.

And Joab orders that the news of this event, the killing of Absalom, is sent back to David from the battlefield. And it was meant to be very good news for David and for his supporters.

It indicated that the coup had been ended and that the kingdom can be returned to David. And there and a young man is very keen to be the first one to take this news to David.

[9 : 10] And so he pleads with David and you can see his plea in 2 Samuel 18 verse 19. So 2 Samuel 18 verse 19. He says, Please let me go and carry tidings to the king that the Lord has delivered him from the power of his enemies.

Now, let me tell you, let me put it to you the way that the Greek version of the Old Testament puts it. It puts it something like this. Please let me go and gospel the king that the Lord has delivered him from the power of his enemies.

Now, what then happens is there are two runners who set out to take the news and the watchman at David's end, some distance away, see the runners, two runners coming with the news to them. And they're particularly heartened by the fact that it comes at the hand of a young man, Ahimehaz.

And the watchman says this. Look at verse 27. This is a good man. He comes with good gospel. And the Greek adds the word good to the word gospel.

Anyway, eventually that news is received by David. And for the kingdom, for the subjects, it is very good news. But I want you to notice if you read in the passage, it is not good news for David.

[10 : 29] For he has lost his beloved, handsome, gifted young son. He's bereft. He goes into a back room and he says or above the gate and he says, Absalom, my son, my son, Absalom.

And he laments the death of this son. He withdraws from his men. He's in deep mourning. It's clear that the news, though it may seem good news to many others, is not good news to him personally.

In fact, it has been very bad news for him at a personal level. Friends, I want to tell you this story because it tells you a bit how the way, how the term gospel in its verbal forms and is used in the Old Testament and even in some of its noun forms.

Just as in the rest of the Greek speaking world, the word had connotations for people who read the Old Testament. It had all those connotations of great tidings, of good news, of glad things that were happening.

But this story adds another element. It tells us that what is good news for some can be bad news for others. But there's one more thing that we need to add here.

[11 : 36] And that is that this word group is used in one more important place in the Greek version of the Old Testament. It is used in the second half of the book of Isaiah. And it's used to refer to the good news of God's redemption through his servant.

This servant will preach great news, good news. He will proclaim the favorable year of the Lord. He will announce that God has redeemed Jerusalem.

And it's all there in our first Bible reading. So turn with it. Turn with me to it again. Isaiah 52, verse 7. And I slightly amended what you're reading. You see if you can notice the changes that I've made.

So Isaiah chapter 52, verse 7. It says this. How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the gospelers of peace.

Friends, let's see if we can put all of this together.

[12 : 38] Because it's quite important. If you understand this, you'll understand some very important things about the gospel. The first thing to say is that our versions of the Bible are both helpful and unhelpful when they translate the Greek word for gospel.

Some of our versions of the Bible simply translate the Greek word for gospel with the term good news. That's helpful in one sense because that's the default translation of the term.

At another level, it's really not so helpful. Because the good news of the gospel can actually be bad news if you do not receive it rightly. You see, if you hear the gospel and reject it, let me tell you, friends, it is bad news for you.

Because it tells you that God will judge you unless you repent. Remember the very first words of Jesus. Repent. For the kingdom of God is at hand.

You see, if you don't repent, the gospel that is coming near in Jesus will be bad news for you. Now, other versions of the Bible, they dodge all of this. And in some sense, this is good.

[13 : 42] They say, well, the gospel, wherever the Greek word gospel occurs, we'll put gospel in, in our English translations. That's helpful because it uses the term as a technical term and helps us to see wherever this term is used.

However, it's not helpful in another way because it doesn't convey the default translation of good news. Of course, other translations sort of mix and match. And that's just very confusing.

Anyway, since the word is so important in Romans 1, and since it's so important for this series of Bible talks, I thought I should give you some background to it. So that's been quite technical. Hopefully, you've grasped what's going on.

Now that we've done it, let's turn to Romans 1. So this is our passage for tonight. Romans 1, verse 1. And I want you to look at what Paul tells us about himself. Do you notice the word that he uses?

First of all, he labels himself as a servant. Now, in the original, the word is actually slave. Not servant, but slave. And in Paul's world, the position of a slave was not an exalted position.

[14 : 44] You know, if you're a slave, you weren't in an exalted place in the social hierarchy. It was not a term of honor or importance. But for Paul, who was shaped by the Old Testament, it was a title with lots of history and lots of honor and very significant importance.

After all, you see, Moses and Joshua and David and all the prophets were quite happy to call themselves slaves of God.

That is, they were slaves of the Lord, of Yahweh. But now look back at the passage and notice whose slave Paul is. It's there in verse 1. He's not the slave of God. Well, he is. But look at who he labels himself as being the slave of.

He is the slave of Jesus Christ. Now, in fact, the original here puts those words around the other way. They put the words Jesus and Christ around the other way.

In other words, he is the slave of Christ Jesus. In other words, he is the slave of God's Christ or God's Messiah, who is Jesus.

[15 : 47] And at the end of verse 3, you find out some more about who this Jesus is. For this Jesus, this Messiah, is also the Lord. Can you see what Paul is saying? He's saying, this is my identity.

I am a man of importance. But I'm important only because of whose slave I am. And I am the slave of Jesus, the Lord. And as his slave, I have been given a role.

I am God's apostle. I've been singled out by God for the gospel. This is me. This is my identity. This is my job.

Now, let's see what he has to say. If that's what he's been singled out for, what is this gospel? And with that in mind, notice the very first thing Paul says about the gospel. It is whose gospel?

It is God's gospel. It is the gospel of God. That is God is its origin, its source and its goal. It is from him.

[16 : 44] It is for him. This is the first thing about the gospels. God's gospel. Second thing is highlighted in verse 2. See it there. The gospel is not new. You see, Paul says, no, this is very ancient. In fact, this is a very ancient promise of the eternal God.

It is a gospel that God has promised long ago through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures. The God of the Old Testament, he is saying, is the same God as the God of the New Testament.

And the gospel of the New Testament is a gospel of the God of the Old Testament. There's continuity between the two. These things are the same. It was promised long ago and it has now arrived. Whatever it is that God is doing in the gospel, it is exactly what he's been doing throughout history.

The gospel, he is saying, is no innovation. This is no new thing. This just appeared in the first century. There's no sort of plan A that was in the Old Testament and then plan B in the New. No, this is plan A.

The one that has always been in place. The one ancient plan and promise of God. One gospel of one God predicted by the prophets in the Old Testament fulfilled and proclaimed by Paul the Apostle in the New.

[17 : 52] And the fulfillment in the New is in whom? Jesus the Christ. As verse 3 puts it. Can you see it there? God's promise is concerning his son.

Jesus Christ. Our Lord. Friends, the center of God's eternal gospel plan is a person. And that person is Jesus.

Now, in the original Greek, there's an amazing series of parallel statements. And I'm just going to show them to you with hands. They were to be here on Data Projector, but you'll just have to imagine.

Okay? What is happening here is this. Paul is saying there are two stages in the existence of Jesus. There's a first stage.

That is, his earthly existence. His identity, as Paul says, according to the flesh. Now, according to the flesh, who is Jesus? Well, he's a descendant of David.

[18 : 53] He did the work of a Davidic Messiah. He was Jesus the Messiah, the Christ. But then, well, then came his resurrection. And through the work of the Holy Spirit, he entered another stage.

If you can put it this way, or if we can put it this way, an alternative existence. In that existence, who is he? Well, he's the one appointed son of God in power. And a new history began in him.

And in that era, he is Jesus our Lord. Jesus our reigning king. And now look at verse 5. Paul returns to his role in this, and his role in God's plan is clear.

By God's grace, he's been made an apostle. And he has been sent through Jesus. And his goal is to bring about the obedience of the faith among all the nations on behalf of his name.

Now, the word Gentiles is the word for nations. And that is God's goal. God's goal is all nations. Friends, I want you to notice this.

[19 : 56] It's very important. Do you notice how the Bible begins? Does the Bible begin as you'd expect it to? After all, you know, this is the book of the Jews, at least the Old Testament. It's the book of the Jews.

How would you expect it to begin? Well, you'd expect it to begin with the Jews, wouldn't you? They're the important people. If you're writing a book about the history of Australia, you know, you'd begin with the people you thought were important.

If you're writing a history of the story of any nation, that's what you'd start with. But do you remember how the Old Testament starts? It starts with all humanity, doesn't it?

Because that's what's important in the plans of God. It's all humanity of God. It is all humanity that is important. That's how the Bible begins, with God's focus on the whole world. And where does it end?

Do you remember where the Bible ends? Well, with the focus on all peoples, again. Abraham and his descendants are the means by which God will accomplish his goal of blessing all humanity.

[20 : 58] God's goal has always been and will always be all nations. And so when Paul says he's going to all nations, he's fulfilling the eternal plans of God.

But I want you to notice something else. Did you notice verse 5? That little phrase, the obedience of faith. You see, God's goal in the gospel is not just my personal faith and your personal faith in a personal saviour.

God's goal for all nations of the world is that they do what Adam and Eve and Israel never did. That is, it is that all nations of the world are characterised by what?

An obedience that springs from their faith in the Messiah Christ. God's goal of obedience is changed lifestyle, changed actions.

Obedience. Friends, if you call Jesus Lord, then you are committed to doing what Jesus commands.

[22 : 11] Faith and obedience are two sides of the same coin. Faith in Jesus is designed to issue in obedience to Jesus. Faith in Jesus involves obedience to Jesus.

And obedience in Jesus demonstrates that your faith is actually in a person, Jesus. And friends, I need to say this because I think we, modern Christians, like to separate the two.

There's that neat and comfortable faith that I have in Jesus as my saviour. But it has not been a faith that drives me to obedience. And I can give or take the obedience part of it.

No, no. It is the obedience of faith that you are called to. That is, you are called to obedience that arises out of your faith in Jesus. Do not separate those two.

They belong together. There's one more thing to note. Look at verse 5 again. Did you notice who all this is for? On whose behalf has God done these things in the gospel?

[23 : 13] It's an obedience of faith among all the nations for the sake of his name. And it has, you see, it has its source in Jesus. And it is for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Friends, we begin with the gospel as the source, with God as the source of the gospel. And we finish with Paul praying that Jesus Christ, his Lord, is the one to whom all glory and benefit must go.

And in the middle, did you notice, who do you have? You have the Holy Spirit. Did you notice the Holy Spirit right in the middle there? A little mask sometimes in our English translations. But that's what's going on.

The gospel is thoroughly wrapped up with the triune God. It comes from God. It is for the glory of God and of his Son. And it is brought about through the work of the Spirit and the work of Christ.

Friends, let's just stop and reflect on what we've found. And I wonder if you have observed something about what Paul has said about the gospel. I wonder, did you notice how little of you and me there is in it?

[24 : 19] How little of you and me there is. There is no doubt that the gospel is for us as individuals. There can be no mistaking that it is the good news because it tells us of how we can be forgiven for sin.

It is surely and certainly about spiritual, personal spiritual transformation. But that is not the heart of the gospel. Friends, the heart of the gospel is laid out here.

It is about God. God the King. About God's plan fashioned before all eternity. About God's great Son.

Who is the center of two ages. Or eons in God's saving history. It is about God's great news. And it's about an obedient humanity that is forged out of all the nations of the world.

God's gospel is about God. And about God's great kingly rule. About God's great King. Jesus Christ our Lord.

[25 : 21] Now before we wrap all of this up and draw together the implications for us, I want you to notice one more thing. I told you that I think the gospel is at the heart of this passage. And I also think the gospel is at the heart of this book.

And I know this because of how Paul begins and ends his book. He has two bookends to this book. I want you to turn to chapter 16. Verses 25 to 27.

And what I'm going to do is I'm going to read you phrases that occurred in chapter 1. And then I'm going to read you phrases that occur in chapter 16.

The last couple of verses. And I want you to hear them. Because they tell you what Paul thinks his book Romans is about. Because you know if you tell something at the beginning of your book and you end up your book. What are you saying?

Don't forget. This is what we've been all about. So, look at the themes Paul picks up and focuses on. First, I want you to read Romans 16, 25 to 27 where Paul says, according to my gospel.

[26 : 23] Do you remember what he said in chapter 1? It is the gospel of God. Then, look at the same verses. He talks about the proclamation of Jesus Christ.

Remember what he said in the beginning? Concerning his son. Then he talks about, well, it's now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known. Do you remember what he said in chapter 1? Exactly the same thing.

He says, according to the command of the eternal God. He talks about the gospel of God back in chapter 1. He talks about my gospel in chapter 16. He talks about set apart for the gospel of God in chapter 1.

He talks about the obedience of faith in chapter 16. He talks about the obedience of faith among the Gentiles in chapter 1. He ends with, to the only wise God through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever in chapter 16.

And in chapter 1 he says, for the sake of his name. So friends, this gospel is the center of Romans.

[27 : 23] It is the center of God's purposes in his world. Friends, God, his son, and his apostle to the Gentiles are of one mind. And it is a mind that is shaped by the gospel.

And it's centered on the gospel. Friends, this is the people that God wants us to be. I urge you to line up with God and be a church like this.

See, everything I want us to do as we face our future together as a church, I want to be centered on the gospel. I want us to be a church set apart for the gospel.

I want us to be that because I think that's what God wants us to be. Now let me tell you, this would have significant ramifications for us if we did this. It would mean that we're actually counter-cultural, even within Christian culture.

It would mean not being trendy, but being godly. It would mean ensuring that the gospel saturates our whole existence. And it would mean our personal faith, our personal lives, our marriages, our personal relationships, our preaching curriculum, the way we approach that curriculum, our music, the sorts of music that we sing and what is in it, our choices in what we sing, the way we use our money, the way we use these buildings and this property, the way we appoint our staff, the sort of staff that we appoint, the training we give to our leaders, the way we rear our children and teach our children and conduct our children and youth ministry, the way we run all of our meetings.

[29 : 02] Friends, God wants us to be a gospel-centered church. And I want us to be a gospel-centered church. And so I'm going to explicitly start using that term, gospel-centered.

And I want you to join with me. Let's be a gospel-centered church, full of gospel-centered people, on a gospel-centered mission, under the oversight of a gospel-centered father, filled and fueled by a gospel-centered spirit, centered on a crucified and risen son, the Lord Jesus, the Messiah.

The gospel concerning his son is what God has been focused on from all eternity. While I was away, I did some talks on the Trinity, just for a friend of mine in Malaysia.

And do you know one of the striking things I discovered about God the Father? That when you look at what he does, particularly as it's captured in John's gospel, he says he loves his son.

Everything he does is for his son, as it were. His son is at the center of his existence. When his son comes into the world, he says, this is my beloved son with whom I'm well pleased.

[30 : 21] And it's not just that he's quoting Isaiah, that he's saying that's what he wants. This son is the center of his existence, and the gospel glorifies the son.

For the gospel has as its core the glory of the Lord Jesus, as God has the glory of the Lord Jesus at the forefront of what he does.

So I want us to explicitly and openly join with God, and allow this gospel about his son to shape our whole existence, our whole corporate life, our whole individual lives.

And with that challenge today, I want to finish. You see, I've worked you hard. This is the hardest of all of these talks. It has lots of work in it. Thanks for staying with me. In the next five or six talks, I'm going to develop this theme more.

We're going to continue to look at what the gospel is. And we're going to continue to see what God is about in the gospel. And my hope and my prayer is that you'll find yourself excited and fueled by what God has done and is doing through the gospel.

[31 : 28] And I'm going to pray that he'll do great things through the gospel among us for the Lord's name and for the sake of his glory. So let's pray. Father, we thank you for the gospel of your son, for this great and glorious news about him.

Thank you for your love for your son. Thank you for his love for you in obediently going to the cross and yet doing and doing your will with joy.

Thank you, Father, for the salvation won in Christ and for his being glorified through the gospel. We pray, Father, that we as a church may be a gospel-centered church, centered on the things that you are centered on, centered on your son and his glory, centered on all things for the sake of him.

fueled by your spirit and driven on in a common purpose. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.