

Receiving the Gospel

The office and work of Christ

1 'The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor; he has sent Me to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to *those who are* bound;

2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn,

3 To console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they may be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that He may be glorified.'

Prophecy for the elect church

4 'And they shall rebuild the old ruins, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the ruined cities, the desolations of many generations.

5 Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the foreigner *shall be* your ploughmen and your vine-dressers.

6 But you shall be named the priests of the LORD, they shall call you the servants of our God. You shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory you shall boast.

7 Instead of your shame *you shall have* double *honour*, and *instead of* confusion they shall rejoice in their portion. Therefore in their land they shall possess double; everlasting joy shall be theirs.

8 For I, the LORD, love justice; I hate robbery for burnt offering; I will direct their work in truth, and will make with them an everlasting covenant.

9 Their descendants shall be known among the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people. All who see them shall acknowledge them, that they *are* the posterity *whom* the LORD has blessed.'

The response of the elect individuals

10 I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, He has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks *himself* with ornaments, and as a bride adorns *herself* with her jewels.

11 For as the earth brings forth its bud, as the garden causes the things that are sown in it to spring forth, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations. Isaiah 61:1:11

The breakdown of this passage is certain because verse one states, 'The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me, because the LORD has anointed Me ...' and this can only refer to Christ, the one who will accomplish all these things promised. This is confirmed by Lk 4:17-21, 'Then He closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant and sat down. And the eyes of all who were in the synagogue were fixed on Him. And He began to say to them, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing"'. Isaiah then continues in a prophecy about the outcome of Jesus' work of salvation - the effect of the salvation of the elect, particularly that they would all be priests to God. Then follows the response of the elect, who alone have known this salvation, in greatly rejoicing. This breakdown helps us to understand this passage.

From this we can make statements about what salvation is and how it comes to the elect; and this is very important today. Why?

The modern problem

The main emphasis of modern preachers is, '*Get saved to your advantage*'. This contradicts the Biblical message of, '*Know your need and responsibility*'.

Modern preaching is all about a God of love that hates no one, provides salvation for everybody, has no control over who gets saved and wants everyone to have a happy and fulfilled life. Accepting the Gospel, which you do from your own free will and power, is the means to having this fulfilled and happy life. Some preachers (Word Faith) go even further and affirm that embracing the Gospel will result in wealth, prosperity and physical health as well as happiness. Certain radical Charismatics (following Latter Rain ideas) go further still, averring that saved people will learn to be able to manipulate natural forces, contradict natural laws and have power like magicians, comic book heroes or legendary characters.

None of this is Biblical at all.

All of this is based upon a message that accepting Christ is to one's advantage. There is no need to make any great change, no need for self-denial or repentance, no mention of conviction, but an emphasis upon how great it will be if you become a Christian.

This modern Gospel, based on Arminian theology imbued with free-willism and the elevation of the self, is the very opposite of the message proclaimed by Jesus.

Helpfully, the prophet Isaiah helps us to summarise the mission of Christ, in the passage already referred to, and show us what the Gospel actually is.

The crucial issue: what is the Gospel for?

What the Gospel does

It is vital that we first understand what the purpose of the Gospel is, and this is not what most current evangelists preach. The Gospel is not a net thrown indiscriminately into humanity to pull in anyone who grabs hold of the net by their own decision. It is a net which targets the elect and rescues them alone, despite their lack of will to grab it.

The outward call, the general call, the external call of the Gospel is indeed indiscriminate to everyone, but the reprobate¹ cannot hear it and cannot respond to it. Isaiah himself tells us this, in a passage repeated by Christ and the apostles:

Go, and tell this people: 'Keep on hearing, but do not understand; keep on seeing, but do not perceive.' Make the heart of this people dull, and their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and return and be healed. Isa 6:9-10

The inward call, the effectual call of the Gospel, is only heard by the elect and they are given power to receive the message and respond to it by faith.²

Thus the Gospel is two-fold: it captures the elect but it hardens the reprobates who reject it.³ Thus the message of the Gospel results in a separation of humanity according to the divine decree in eternity; it separates men into sheep and into goats. The eternal decree is

¹ The reprobate are the non-elect; those left to damnation: Rm 9:15-23; Prov 16:4; 1 Pt 2:8; Jude 4.

² Jn 6:44, 65.

³ Rm 9:18.

that only some are chosen for eternal life and the rest are left for judgment. The final Day of Judgment also separates men into those who are in Christ and have life and those who are in sin and are sentenced to hell. In between these two events is the work of the Gospel which determines those who are in these camps. The Gospel separates. Indeed Jesus told us that this was his mission:

Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword. For I have come to 'set a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, and a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law'. Matt 10:34-35

So, the Gospel is not an attempt to try to capture the whole world; it is a means of fulfilling the eternal decree to separate men into two types.

This is referred to in verse two above, 'To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God'. The work of Christ in securing the Gospel of salvation results in two expressions of God. The first is the manifestation of the acceptable year of the Lord, a reference to the year of Jubilee when liberty was proclaimed and all debts cancelled, all slaves freed; the second is the manifestation of God's wrath in justice in the Day of Vengeance or Judgment. Thus we have the two sides of the eternal decree: the manifestation of salvation, mercy and grace in the elect but also the manifestation of justice against sin in the condemnation of the wicked.

The eternal decree is pointed to in our text when the Lord explains that the Father had anointed him to preach to the poor ... 'the LORD has anointed Me to preach good tidings to the poor'. Jesus is the anointed one (Christ = 'anointed one')⁴ and the Father is the one who anointed him. This refers to the counsel in eternity whereby God elected a people to be saved, the Son agreed to die for them alone and the Holy Spirit agreed to apply salvation to them in time.

The practical application of this in Gospel preaching

In light of all this, the Gospel preacher must preach in line with the divine decree. Thus he cannot say that God loves everyone since God has clearly stated that he hates some individuals, such as Esau⁵ or groups like the Nicolaitans,⁶ and he hates certain types of people, such as the wicked or the violent.⁷ God hates reprobates because they were selected for destruction in eternity,⁸ therefore a preacher cannot promise life and salvation to such. That would be a lie and a blasphemy.

The purpose of the Gospel is to identify the elect; therefore the preacher must address all without distinction but not make promises that are false. He can preach that whosoever will can come, while affirming that only those God empowers have the will to come.⁹ So he tells his hearers to seek mercy, to plead with God, to reach for grace.¹⁰ Only those who

⁴ 'Christ' is the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew 'Mashiyach' (Messiah or 'anointed'). It was originally a verbal adjective (christos) meaning 'anointed' from the verb to anoint (chrío). It was used often in the Septuagint [Greek OT] as a substantive to translate the Hebrew word 'Messiah' (Gk. Messias).

⁵ Rm 9:13.

⁶ Rev 2:6, 15.

⁷ Ps 5:5-6, 11:5.

⁸ Rm 9:22.

⁹ Jn 6:44, 65.

¹⁰ Paul does this in Acts 17:27.

actually show signs of doing this can be further instructed. Those who reject the Gospel cannot be consoled or promised anything; they can only be repeatedly told to repent.¹¹

The worst thing evangelists can do is to give a general message about the Gospel and then demand immediate action, such as coming to the front of a meeting for salvation, raising a hand or reciting a prayer. In doing this many reprobate will respond emotionally and be told that they are saved when they are still in darkness.¹² Over time this leads to hosts of counselling problems because the root issue is that they are not converted. The only way one can be sure about the conversion of an individual is when they show signs of eternal life. To tell someone that they are saved when you know nothing about them at all is a great error. Jesus warned about superficial responses to Gospel preaching in the parable of the sower; most of the seed bore no fruit.

What the Biblical evangelist looks for especially is signs of conviction of sin. People must hear the Gospel and be given time for it to cement in their conscience a revelation of their need. The person under conviction, the person awakened to sin, is a person who suddenly realises his great need for salvation. Until a person knows that he is a sinner under wrath he has no sensible need for salvation.

Thus the Gospel is addressed particularly to deal with the issue of need; how to be saved from sin. Thus the Gospel is spoken of as bringing help to the poor, joy to those mourning, setting the captives free, and healing the broken-hearted. These are all people in need and the symbolism is one of the need to eradicate sin. Sin makes people poor in spirit; sin causes grief; sin causes bondage; sin causes emotional distress.

Thus the prophecy of Isaiah about the work of Christ shows us that his ministry is directed to these very people. It is not aimed at the self-sufficient, the over-confident and proud, those who live at ease, and those who consider themselves to be rich.

The Biblical Gospel is addressed to:

The poor

‘The Spirit of the Lord GOD *is* upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good tidings to the poor.’

The first people addressed are those who know that they are poor. Like all the qualities addressed in this passage what is in view is sin and its debilitating effects. The poor here are poor in Spirit; they are unable to deal with their sin and have an understanding that they are needy, *‘such as are sensible of sin, and humbled for it ... and have a mean opinion of themselves’* [John Gill]. They are people who have nothing but bad news because they are sinners and the Gospel comes as good news. They are aware of their lack of the riches of righteousness and have a heavy heart for their lack.

STEP ONE OF AN AWAKENED SOUL: BE AWARE OF YOUR ABSOLUTE SPIRITUAL POVERTY CAUSED BY THE RUINATION OF SIN. KNOW YOU ARE A SINNER.

¹¹ Acts 17:30.

¹² Those who have practised this, from CG Finney to Billy Graham, have found that their large numbers of ‘conversions’ at meetings fade away over time so that up to 95% fell away.

The broken-hearted

'He has sent me to heal the broken-hearted.'

The Gospel is only heard by those with broken hearts. Until you are convicted for your sin you see no need for a saviour. When you see the devastation of your sin your heart will be broken. There can be no repentance without conviction; there can be no conviction without a broken heart. A heart broken for sin is a key sign of contrition.

A broken-hearted person is a humble person and humility is one of the requirements for hearing the Gospel: **'God resists the proud, but gives grace to the humble,'** (1 Pt 5:5).

Gill says that these folk are those, *'whose hearts are smitten and made contrite by the Spirit and Word of God, and are truly humbled under a sense of sin; who are cut to the heart, have wounded spirits, and in great pain.'* The word of God must come to a soul and break it up like a hammer.¹³ It breaks through all the pride and self-sufficiency and brings a realisation of total despair of self; a realisation that you are full of sin and an enemy of God; doomed and condemned. The word of God is also like a plough that digs up the person, ripping furrows in everything he had confidence in and uprooting weeds, so that that the seed of the Gospel can be planted in the right soil.

The person who has been broken up by God is a soul that is sensitive to his sin and in grief about it.

STEP TWO OF AN AWAKENED SOUL: BE BROKEN UP BY YOUR SIN. CONVICTION OF SIN.

The captives

'To proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to *those who are bound.*'

The Gospel comes to those who are awakened to see that they are captives and in bondage. They are captive to sin and cannot stop sinning. They are prisoners of Satan who holds them in the chains of their sin. They are in bondage to God's law, which they have transgressed as a result of their disobedience. They are captives to their own conscience, which testifies against them for breaking its guidelines. In every respect mankind is guilty and imprisoned by his behaviour.

What the Gospel does to such is to show that their condition is not freedom but imprisonment and that they need to escape from chains.

STEP THREE OF AN AWAKENED SOUL: UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE IN BONDAGE TO SIN.

The mourners

'To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn, to console those who mourn in Zion, to give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness.'

The acceptable year is an allusion to the year of Jubilee. This is a type of the Gospel Age since it was a proclamation of liberty, release from indebtedness, a restoration of what was lost in slavery and a cessation from work. It was initiated by a declaration on the Day of Atonement, pointing to the initiating work of the cross. It is not a reference to a literal single year.

It is a day of vengeance since vengeance was taken upon sin; the full wrath of God was emptied out upon the sin of the elect in Christ on the cross. On the cross Jesus also triumphed over Satan, spoiled his demonic horde, demolished death for believers and took away the claims of the law against those under the cross. Wrath was also declared for the

¹³ "Is not My word like a fire?" says the LORD, "and like a hammer that breaks the rock in pieces?" Jer 23:29.

Jews who would not have Christ as King and the age would be terminated in a great day of wrath on the Day of Judgment when all men will be condemned for their sin, along with Satan and his fallen angels.

Mourning means grief and the grief is grieving over the effects of sin in one's life. Until one is at the point of mourning for sin one cannot hear the promises of the Gospel. The culmination of the Spirit convicting a soul of sin is falling into deep grief for all the wrong that you have done in your life.

Few understand this today, but it was commonly understood in past ages. The proclamation of the Gospel must first bring an understanding of need and that need is the sense of being a sinner. The soul must be brought to the place where he says, 'What can I do?'¹⁴

Those who mourn are 'in Zion', that is they are elect; they are the church. Only those called by God from eternity¹⁵ hear the words of the Spirit in the Gospel proclaimed and respond with conviction and belief.¹⁶

STEP FOUR OF AN AWAKENED SOUL: GRIEVE FOR YOUR SIN.

Interim conclusion

Only when a soul is experiencing these conditions is it able to understand the promise of a Saviour. There is no need for a Saviour until you realise that you need saving from sin.

The answer to these problems is Christ

The Gospel is a reversal of our spiritual poverty

The Gospel is good news because it promises riches instead of spiritual poverty. The Gospel promise is that we have Christ in us, the hope of glory, and that he is the riches of God to us. Once saved, the Christian life is but a gradual discovery of how great the riches of Christ are in us.

[Paul prays that] the eyes of your understanding being enlightened; that you may know what is the hope of His calling, what are the riches of the glory of His inheritance in the saints, and what *is* the exceeding greatness of His power toward us who believe, according to the working of His mighty power. Eph 1:18-19

The Christian life is one of richness. Every act of righteousness performed in faith results in building up further treasure in heaven. The greatest riches in the world, the most magnificent pleasures and trophies, are nothing but spiritual poverty before God. They have no reality; they are dross in eternal terms. But the riches of the Gospel are eternal, true and spiritual; they are the sharing of God's own inheritance.

The Gospel transforms our spiritual poverty into eternal riches.

¹⁴ Acts 2:37, 16:30, 22:10.

¹⁵ In God's mind the church is a complete body in the eternal decree before time began. That is why the church is always loved by God from eternity (Eph 1:4-5).

¹⁶ It is also possible to see a separate party here. There are 'all who mourn' and 'those who mourn in Zion'. This would then mean that the Gospel is applied to the elect Gentiles and also the elect Jews, those in Zion aware of their sin and rejection of the Messiah. In other words, the church seen as the two chief components: elect Jews and Greeks.

The Gospel is healing from broken-heartedness

The Gospel is good news because it heals our broken-heartedness. It is sin that causes sadness, and especially the guilt and remorse that necessarily comes with it. Make no mistake, whatever their outward pretensions of confidence, all men deep down have unhealed sadness and grief as a result of sin. Everyone has regrets and wishes that they could change the past; but they can't. The result is broken-heartedness as a result of sin.

But the Gospel changes this and heals all those past regrets; it wipes away the guilt of sin. Everyone needs healing; everyone needs to have sin washed away and the healing medication of the comfort of God applied to the wounds of sin.

The Gospel results in great rejoicing because believers share in the joy of Christ; everlasting joy has become theirs. Believers rejoice – in the Lord; their soul is joyful in God. Since God is infinite their joy is infinite; since God is eternal their source of joy never fades away.

The Gospel heals the broken-hearted.

The Gospel in Christ is liberty from sin.

The Gospel is good news because Christ obtains freedom for his people and delivers them from the oppression of being bound to the law, to sin, to Satan and to a guilty conscience. Christ is liberty from the governorship of sin; he is freedom from the curse; he is release from the condemnation of the law and he is deliverance from the power of Satan.

Ordinary people don't realise this but they are actually in prison; they are bound in sin and shackled to the devil. They are captives to their own sinful desires, proud selfishness, doomed to follow the wicked course of this world. The best the world can offer is to be so dumbed-down and de-sensitised to the truth that men fail to see what is actually going on. Their daily habits that keep them occupied have become a padded prison cell; without these addictions¹⁷ they lose hope, comfort and purpose. Only when these are lost, overcome or denied can they begin to see the real truth.

This world has an end and that end is accountability for one's sin resulting in eternal condemnation. Thus this life is a prison cell awaiting the judge's sentence of death. Some people have more comfortable lives than others, but all are in the same prison.

Only Christ can deliver a person from this sentence of death and the Gospel is the means to receive the promise of life in Christ. Real life, eternal life, only begins when one knows Christ and becomes a part of God's family.

The Gospel brings freedom and deliverance from the power, penalty and guilt of sin.

The Gospel in Christ is comfort for mourners

The Gospel is good news because it is comfort for those who have been brought to full conviction.

It brings beauty for ashes. The crushing blows of conviction brought one's life to a sense of being burned up and crushed, but Christ is seen to change all that as a diamond is born out of crushing pressure on coal. In the original Hebrew there is a play on words, to give *pe'er*

¹⁷ The addictions of 'satisfied' affluent people include: money, fame, power, partying, ambition, celebrity status, watching soaps, family social events, sex, gambling, prescription drugs, purchasing items, hobbies etc. Those of more desperate people include: drug abuse, stealing, fighting, fornication, crime, fraud, lying, murder, torture, warfare etc.

(‘beauty’) for ‘*epher* (‘ashes’). Instead of the sackcloth and ashes for grief, Christ gives his people beautiful garments of salvation and a robe of righteousness. This is speaking symbolically of the great exchange in justification where our sin is taken upon Christ and his righteousness is imputed to us.

Instead of mourning and grief we have the oil of joy, symbolic of the gift of the Holy Spirit. Instead of death we have resurrection life by the Spirit who baptises us into Christ and gives us new life. Oil was poured on the head of people at times of rejoicing in the OT and joy is the opposite of grief. Indeed, the believer is brought to know joy unspeakable full of glory in Christ because it is spiritual joy and not human pleasure.

The Gospel brings comfort and joy instead of grief.

Conclusion

There is much more that could be expounded in this passage, especially the prophecy about the church, but that is beyond our scope here. What is vital is that we understand the purpose of the Gospel; it is to release the elect into faith but it is to harden the reprobate in condemnation. Thus we do not soften the Gospel or twist it into an offer of a better life for all and sundry.

Thus, in our preaching of the Gospel, we must seek to bring about conviction of sin and only when we see such conviction can we then apply the promises of life in Christ. True faith and repentance can only come from a convicted, awakened sinner. Any short-circuiting of this process will lead to disastrous consequences.

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