

THE GOSPEL: THE GOOD NEWS

But God: a personal reflection on the gospel

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The gospel is reflected on every page of the NT, but there are 3 ‘gospel-in-a-nutshell’ passages which summarise the gospel in a way not too dissimilar from how we might present it: Ro 3/21-30 (with preparation for it from 1/18 but especially 3/9); Ep 2/1-10; Tt 3/3-8. They are different: Ro is formal and legal; Ep is informal and communal; Tt is personal and emotional. But (as we would expect) they are more similar than different: they all have a movement from our state (sinful) and status (condemned) before the gospel to our status (justified) and state (holiness enjoined) after.

The most striking feature of each nutshell, however, and where the 3 passages are most alike, are the 2 simple words in the middle of each passage, which are given as the sole cause of the decisive change: *but now...but God...but God*. The abrupt shift in each case is as massive as it is unexpected; in fact, it is nothing short of violent. And no other explanation is given in any of the passages except *but now...but God*. And since the *but now* owes its existence to the *but God*, the gospel ultimately boils down to just these 2 words: *but God*. There is no other explanation given for it, no other reason for it, except *but God*.

Consider how inexplicable and unreasonable this is. Paul, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, at length and with clarity and forcefulness, has held up to us the shocking extent of man’s rebellion and depravity, and made vivid God’s righteous wrath against, and necessary judgement on, both sin and sinner (q 1/18 – 3/20). Nothing in all of that gives the faintest warning of what will follow immediately after – we could sit and conjecture (or dare to dream) for a 1000 years and never come up with what comes next: *But now* a righteousness from God has been made known...This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe...justified freely by his grace ...the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus. Surely we cannot (or should not) move from v20 to v21 without sitting for a long time in stunned silence – aghast, shocked, disorientated, overwhelmed. Surely we who have been given wedding clothes should be as speechless (initially, before bursting into everlasting praise) as the man who didn’t (cf. Mw 22/12). There is tragedy as well as accountability when any man can make that move without awe and conviction.

Paul paints our wickedness and resulting predicament much more briefly but just as vividly in Ep (q 2/1-3, 12) and Tt (q 3/3). And just as unexpectedly and uncaused, there follows: *But...God; But...God*. And the only further explanation we are given is the mention of certain things God has revealed to be true of himself (attributes). Ro mentions his grace (and justice); Ep and Tt both mention God’s love, mercy, grace (Ep 3x) and kindness. It is these unchanging and beautiful perfections in the nature and heart of God that lie behind the *why* (love, kindness) and the *how* (mercy, grace) of the gospel.

Conversely, each nutshell goes out of its way to stress that absolutely nothing about the gospel has its origins in anything man is or does. (In this game, we are lucky to get nil.) Ro says *no-one* will be declared righteous in his [God’s] sight by observing the law (v20 cf. v21,28). Ep asserts this [salvation][is] *not* from yourselves; it is *not* by works (2/8f). Tt emphasises it is *not* because of righteous things we had done (3/5). So there is no room for anyone to boast in any way about anything concerning his salvation: Where then is boasting? It is excluded (Ro 3/27); so that *no-one* can boast (Ep 2/9). The gospel is absolutely nought of man and all of God: a righteousness *from God* has been made known...This righteousness *from God* (Ro 3/21f). Salvation is the *gift* of God (Ep 2/8): it cannot be bought, earned or deserved – by a good life or good works, by correct doctrine or religious observances, by tears (although tears may follow conviction of sin &/or the knowledge of forgiveness) or toil, by troubles (i.e. suffering, however redemptive) or zeal.

Perhaps no great hymn of yesteryear has better captured this unrelenting, all-consuming God-ness of the gospel and its salvation as this one: *Not the labours of my hands / Can fulfil thy law's demands / Could my zeal no respite know / Could my tears forever flow / All for sin could not atone / Thou must save and thou alone. Nothing in my hands I bring / Simply to thy cross I cling / Naked, come to thee for dress / Helpless, look to thee for grace / Foul, I to the fountain fly / Wash me, Saviour, or I die! No wonder the hymn writer ends: While I draw this fleeting breath / When my eyelids close in death / When I soar through tracts unknown / See thee on thy judgement throne / Rock of Ages, cleft for me / Let me hide myself in thee*

The good news is *all* of God; there is *nothing* we can bring or do or add. We are utterly dependent on God taking the initiative, finding and providing a way out, and completing the work. This he has done – praise God, oh praise God! The gospel that saves us defined and summarised in two words: *but God!*

In the light of this, I want to make 2 appeals, one perhaps expected, the other less so...

If you have never responded to the unexpected, unreasonable *but God*, will you do so today? I have not actually outlined the gospel step by step, but I think I have said enough for you to grasp its essence (and the chances are you've heard it from some one or more people before). I implore you, do not add to the tragedy and accountability that will be yours if you move from Ro 3/20 to v21 without awe and conviction, from God's righteous wrath against and judgement on sin and sinner to the free gift of forgiveness, righteousness and salvation without repentance for your sin and faith in the Saviour God has provided.

But most of you have responded to the gospel. You know and no doubt love it. But I want to tell you some additional good news: by the HS, you can see the gospel in such a greater, clearer way that it's as if you never quite got it before; you can grow in your understanding and appreciation of the gospel and in your love for the God who gave it. This has certainly been my experience over my 51 years of following Jesus.

If you are humble in nature and never thought of yourself more highly than you ought, or if your life was a mess and it left you in no doubt of your need for a Saviour, or if for any other reason you were always aware of your imperfections and unworthiness, then perhaps you 'got' the gospel to a large measure from the very beginning – just how gracious and miraculous and undeserved it is.

But if (like me) you were generally liked, successful, confident, capable, moral and self-reliant, and so easily proud, arrogant, superior and self-sufficient, then it's much harder to truly 'get' the gospel straight away. When I first heard the gospel a number of times in my early teens, I understood and readily accepted the component about my sin and needing the salvation God had provided through his Son on the cross. I gave my life to Jesus, and I have no doubt it was a genuine and sincere conversion. But deep down at the back of my heart there was still the unconscious belief that I was quite a good guy and, while not quite doing God a favour by believing in him, nevertheless thought that I had quite a lot to offer him. And then, as the years rolled by, I got to know myself more honestly and completely; even though I really loved the Lord and had given my life to serving him, I was repeatedly confronted by my own weakness, fickleness and faithlessness. (It takes a lifetime to deal with pride.) I saw more and more how little of me was in the gospel, how little I could have expected or deserved it, how miraculous and gracious it was – yes, for me just as much as it would have been for Hitler, Stalin or Mao Zedong if they had believed. I have grown hugely in my understanding and appreciation of the gospel and, with it, in my love for the one who gave it.

A recent song caught my attention because it expressed exactly what I know now vs what I thought then: *I'm not a hero of the faith / I'm not as strong as I once thought I was*

CF. JN 8/9A *At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first...*

There is another old hymn which I only learnt in recent years. Had I heard it 50 years ago, I may well have thought it overly negative and not really applicable to me. But now I know it is so, so true. Every line of it is pure gospel: *I hear the Saviour say, 'Your strength, indeed, is small / Child of weakness, watch and pray / Find in me your all in all'. Lord, now indeed I find / Your power and yours alone / Can change the leper's spots / And melt the heart of stone. For nothing good have I / Whereby your grace to claim / I'll wash my garments white / In the blood of Calvary's Lamb. And when, before the throne / I stand in him complete / 'Jesus died my soul to save' / My lips shall still repeat. Jesus paid it all / All to him I owe / Sin had left a crimson stain / He washed it white as snow*

So much do I now grasp the truth of those words (that I can contribute absolutely nothing, that I am utterly dependent on him to do it all) that I cannot but join in with the chorus at the end with lungs fit to burst:

O praise the One who paid my debt / And raised this life up from the dead!

Perhaps you have been on a similar journey – but we can all grow in our grasp of “the glorious gospel of the blessed God” (1 Ti 1/11), no matter how many times we’ve heard it or how long we’ve believed it – the revelation of just how marvellous and miraculous, how utterly unexpected and undeserved, how kind and gracious it is.

Lord, we get to Ro 3/20 and there is only darkness and doom, eternal death and damnation – and no hope. Then... Lord, we have no words (able to explain it or sufficient to thank you) – except *but God!*