

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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Paul's Farewell Address: The Gospel of the Grace of God - Acts 20:24

If you were saying goodbye to some friends you had lived amongst for years, and knew that you would never see them again, what would you say? Maybe there would be apologies and regrets; perhaps best wishes and promises of lasting friendship. Today we find Paul saying his goodbyes to the Christians of Ephesus. You can read the account in Acts 20:16-38. In this, the first of four talks on the subject, we will look briefly at the background to this farewell and then, in a bit more detail, at this week's topic, **the Gospel of the grace of God**.

Historical Background

Paul visited Ephesus briefly on his second missionary journey but declined a request to stay, being in a hurry to get to Jerusalem. He promised to return again if God was willing. The eloquent preacher Apollos later visited, although he only knew about the baptism of John at that time and not the complete Gospel. Sometime later, on his third missionary journey, Paul returned to Ephesus and found twelve disciples of John the Baptist. He told them the full truth of salvation through Christ's death and resurrection and they were baptised and received the Holy Spirit. Paul then stayed and taught in the Ephesian synagogue for three months. When some became hardened against the word he withdrew and turned to the Gentiles. He stayed in Ephesus a further two years with the effect that, "all who dwelt in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). Paul showed great power and many unusual miracles were worked by him. Many who had practiced magic were saved and the value of the magic books they burned was huge. In short, "the word of the Lord grew mightily and prevailed" (Acts 19:20). Paul intended to go through Macedonia and Achaia to Jerusalem and then on to Rome, and sent Timothy and Erastus on ahead of him. A silversmith called Demetrius, worried about his loss of income because people were turning from worshipping the goddess Diana to following Christ, stirred up a riot. Paul then left for Macedonia and Greece, eventually returning to Asia again on his way to Jerusalem for Pentecost. Not wishing to be detained in Asia for long, Paul declined to visit Ephesus again. He landed in Miletus, about thirty miles from Ephesus, and summoned the elders of the Ephesian church to meet him there. Paul then made the farewell address that is the subject of this series of talks.

Paul's Farewell Address

Rather than regrets or best wishes, Paul begins his farewell by recalling his manner of life among the Ephesians. I'm not sure how I would summarise my life over the last few years, but I am afraid I could not really claim, like Paul, to have been "serving the Lord with all humility, with many tears and trials" (Acts 20:19). In the next two verses he states how he "kept back nothing that was helpful, but proclaimed it to you, and taught you publicly and from house to house, testifying to Jews, and also to Greeks, repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ". He tells the Ephesian elders about his plans to go to Jerusalem and the Spirit's testimony about the "chains and tribulations" that will result. This leads him on to the statement that includes our theme for today: "But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God" (Acts 20:24).

What is this Gospel that so enthused Paul that he can speak of it as being more important than any suffering that he might have to endure, more important even than his own life? To help us consider the great topic of this Gospel I will borrow six questions from a well known poem by Rudyard Kipling.

*I have six honest serving men,
They taught me all I knew,
Their names are What and Where and When,
And How and Why and Who.*

I am going to use each question twice, so that will mean twelve sections in total. I will run through them briefly;

1. What is the Gospel?
2. What are its results?
3. Where did it come from?
4. Where will it take me?

5. When did it begin?
6. When will it end?
7. How did Paul receive it?
8. How did Paul pass it on?
9. Why was it needed?
10. Why is grace central?
11. Who is it for?
12. Who can preach it?

1. What is the Gospel?

The word Gospel means simply, good news. It is much more than just a way to remove sins. It is everything that God can give to those who believe on His Son. There is only one Gospel. It is not just unique in the sense that nothing else is quite like it, but also because it is the **only** possible Gospel. Anything else is a fake, and not a Gospel. The Gospel is the arrival of God in His own world to save His creatures. It is God's love, mercy and grace. It is the only possible escape route from the grip of sin and death. It is an incredible transforming power. It is new life. It is heaven brought down to men and men brought to heaven.

2. What are its results?

This Gospel results in sins forgiven and the root problem of sin itself judged and, ultimately, removed. This is what gives it the power to transform. Paul himself was a wonderful example of this. Saul of Tarsus was the worst kind of 'religious' man. He was an extremist bigot, full of hatred. Does that sound harsh? What else can we call a man whose idea of serving God is to terrorise people, dragging men and women from their houses, and travelling abroad to pursue his enemies? But God pursued Paul and transformed him completely to be His humble servant, as we have already thought. The results go much further than the blessing of men and women though. A bride suitable for God's own Son is being formed. God's righteousness is being vindicated. God is being shown to be "just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus", (Romans 3:26). In fact the book of Romans is probably the closest thing we have to Paul's definition of what the Gospel of the grace of God is.

3. Where did it come from?

The heart and mind of God are the only possible source of this Gospel. No one but God can reveal God. It is the Gospel of the grace **of God**, nobody else could even imagine it. Nobody else could ever deliver it. All of history has been leading up to it. It is not God's 'plan B', after the fall of humanity but His original and ultimate goal. The Gospel is certainly not the result of human philosophy, developed from men's ever evolving religious ideas. This is the reason it can never be superseded or surpassed and, while we always need to ensure that we tell it in ways that people can understand, the Gospel never needs updating or 'reinterpreting for today'.

4. Where will it take me?

Into the very presence of God Himself! Not heaven as a beautiful, safe, happy place to be, but the literal presence of an infinitely holy God. That is quite some place for a hopeless sinner like me to be at home! This is what the grace of God will do. Of course I am encouraged to enter into the presence of God even now so that heaven will not be such a change for me.

Paul also found that the Gospel took him all over the world and into, and out of, many dangers. Who knows where it might take you and me?

5. When did it begin?

Actually that is quite a difficult question to answer. We could say that it began back in eternity with "a lamb... foreordained before the foundation of the world", (1 Peter 1:19-20). In the mind and plan of God this Gospel was always His design and everything led inexorably towards it. In this sense all of the Old Testament, from Adam to the Law and the prophets was the beginning of the Gospel of the grace of God. However it really only began at the time of the book of Acts. The Gospel is not really present in the Old Testament because Christ had not then lived, risen and ascended. The death and resurrection of the Lord Jesus are completely essential to the Gospel and so, in time, it cannot be said to have begun until they were accomplished. In a further sense, it begins with the later ministry of Paul, related at the end of Acts. At first the apostles preached the national salvation of Israel by the acceptance of the Messiah they had so recently crucified. They spoke about His imminent return to reign as King of Israel. It was only later, following Israel's repeated rejection of Christ, that what we know as the Gospel, free grace to Jews and Gentiles alike, was fully seen.

6. When will it end?

Another tricky question, with more than one right answer! We could say, never! God's grace, and the results of it, will last for all eternity; that is the purpose and the glory of the Gospel. In this sense the blessings and results of the Gospel are limitless. Of course this cannot mean that new people are still having their sins forgiven forever. In that sense the Gospel (or perhaps more accurately, the preaching of the Gospel) ends when God has finally gathered in the last believer at the very close of the history of this world. However the Gospel that will be preached on earth after all Christians have been called to be with the Lord Jesus in heaven will be rather a different Gospel from that which we preach today. So we could say that the Gospel of the grace of God will cease to be preached when the Lord returns for His own.

7. How did Paul receive it?

Certainly not as a tradition handed down by men. Paul speaks in Romans 16:25 and 2 Timothy 2:8 about "my Gospel". It was not just his because he spent his whole life preaching it. It was his in a special way because God used Paul to reveal so many parts of it in the epistles he wrote. When converted Paul did not consult with the apostles to get the details of what he should preach, God made it known to him directly. You can read his account in Galatians 1:11-20. We have seen that Paul could speak about "my Gospel" in a special way, but we also need to receive the Gospel as if from God Himself, and each of us needs to make it "my Gospel". We have heard the Gospel from human preachers and been taught its truths by human teachers, and we should certainly thank God for such people. However, we need to constantly go back to God's word in, God's presence, and ask Him to show us directly from the Bible, just what the Gospel of His grace involves. When I pass on the Gospel to others I will do so much more effectively if I have made it "my Gospel" by study and meditation. This should shine through as I speak. This leads me to my next point...

8. How did Paul pass it on?

The simple answer is, in every way imaginable. Of course Paul was a great preacher - think about the sermon on Mars Hill, recorded in Acts 17. You may not be a preacher at all. He was also the pre-eminent teacher of the Gospel, both in word and in writing. You may not be a teacher either. He travelled thousands of miles to tell all kinds of people the Gospel, when travelling was really tough. The chances are that you are not a missionary either, although maybe God might yet call you to be one. After all, missionaries are not 'super Christians', but ordinary believers whom God calls to do less ordinary service for Him. Do not think that God cannot possibly call you to do that. Maybe one of the reasons that missionaries are such a small proportion of believers, is that we are so convinced that God will not call **us**, that we do not listen to Him when He does! God is certainly calling every one of us to "do the work of an evangelist", (2 Timothy 4:5). I have omitted one of the chief ways that Paul passed on the Gospel, he lived it! Everybody that Paul came into contact with, from governors and kings to the low ranking soldiers chained to Paul the prisoner, not only heard him speak the Gospel of the grace of God, but saw him put it into practice. Paul lived it out in every aspect of his life, no matter how mundane. Are our lives as thoroughly 'ingrained' with the Gospel as this?

9. Why was it needed?

A good summary can be found in the first three chapters of Romans. These chapters explain clearly why nobody meets God's standard and all need the Gospel. Men and women might like to think they are progressing and steadily advancing as a race. In fact the whole of human history, apart from God's interventions, has been a retreat from God, and a descent into further pride and rebellion, and the resulting corruption. Centuries of trial by conscience, government and divine law, have proved our complete inability to move towards God or to meet His righteous demands. I said a little earlier that only God can reveal God, but revelation by itself is entirely insufficient. A God revealed, no matter how glorious and loving He may be, is still only a hopelessly tantalising vision, if I have no way of approaching Him. **God** was kept at a distance from me by my sins. The **grace of God** meant that He could never be at rest until He resolved the impasse by sending His own Son to die for me. The **Gospel of the grace of God** is the good news that God has made a way to remain righteous and yet bring sinners like me right at home into His presence forever. Without it nobody could be saved, creation would be damaged forever, God would have been defeated by sin, and God's love for us would have been forever frustrated!

10. Why is grace central?

Or, to put it another way, why is it not the Gospel of the mercy of God, love of God, righteousness of God or peace of God? All these words are associated with the Gospel, and express part of its truth, but the Spirit chose to emphasise grace here. Grace tells me something about God and something about me. It tells me that God cares. He is not a God consumed by anger and eager to judge. He is not far off, aloof and indifferent. His love makes Him want to bless me. The grace of God suggests a God with His arms full of gifts that He is longing to give to those He loves. What it reveals about me is my desperate need. The story is often told of a rather plain lady, from years gone by, who had

gone to have her portrait painted. She pointedly told the artist that she hoped he was going to 'do her justice'. The artist replied, "Madam, it is not justice that you require, it is mercy!" We were in a similar position. We could not rely on God's justice; that could only condemn us. We had not earned a blessing or put God in our debt, see Romans 4:4. If God was ever going to save and bless us, it had to be on the basis of grace – a generous provision that is thoroughly undeserved.

11. Who is it for?

People like the Ephesians; people like you and me. One of the beauties of this Gospel is its universal scope. We all like to think that we are special. Marketing experts know they can appeal to us by giving us 'exclusive' offers, or telling us we have been "specially selected to receive" some bargain. 'Common' is not a very attractive label, but it applies to the Gospel of the grace of God. Of course it is precious beyond measure and purchased at indescribable cost, but it is on offer to every single human being on the planet and you can't get more common than that! This is just as well because every human being needs it desperately. Good people and bad, pleasant people and difficult, religious and worldly.

12. Who can preach it?

If every human being needs this Gospel then everybody who knows it themselves has a responsibility to pass it on. We are all tempted to think that the Gospel is so special, that it can only be preached by special people like Paul. We mostly think this, not because we are overwhelmed by the glory of the Gospel, but because it gives us a good excuse to do nothing. The job of spreading the good news falls on all of us who are saved. Remember the story of the lepers outside the city of Samaria after the Syrian siege had been broken by God? You can read it in 2 Kings 7. They knew it was a "day of good tidings", and that keeping the good news to themselves would have been positively wrong. Sadly the Gospel is often preached by people who have never actually felt its power in their own hearts. If you know somebody like that you need to pray that it will speak to them, and if you know some of the congregation they preach to, then maybe God wants **you** to speak simply to them about what the Gospel of the grace of God really is.

Conclusion

Paul could speak confidently to the Ephesian elders about the work that he had done among them. We might never have Paul's responsibilities, but let us honestly assess our service to ensure that we too are ready to "serve the Lord with all humility". May we too be ready to face trials with a willing spirit and may we speak about the Gospel, whenever we have opportunity so that we are "innocent of the blood of all men". Then we too can look forward to, one day finishing our race with joy.

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