

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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The Gospel of Christ Jesus

The ABC Gospel

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

Today we have a one-off talk entitled the ABC Gospel. All Bible quotations are from the New King James Version.

My job involves a combination of medical laboratory science and IT. That makes for a working life full of acronyms and lots of technical complexity. It also means that I work with some rather clever people. Some of them can talk fluently for ten or fifteen minutes and leave me understanding about five per cent of what they have said! But they are not the genuinely clever ones. The people who truly impress me are the ones who can speak for a couple of minutes, on a topic I know to be hugely complex, and yet make everything sound crystal clear and comprehensible! Being able to communicate something difficult or involved in simple, clear language is a significant skill, and, unfortunately, rather a rare one. How does that translate to the amazing gospel that the Bible presents? Well, that gospel is certainly deeply profound and has a very wide range of elements to it – does that mean it can never be communicated clearly and simply? Thankfully not! God has determined that the gospel that is applicable to absolutely everybody, should also be comprehensible to everybody. That doesn't mean that everything that the gospel achieves, and how it achieves it, can be grasped in a few minutes. In fact, Christians spend their whole lives working through all its aspects and implications. But it does mean that the gospel can be summarised and presented briefly and simply, in fact, as simply as ABC!

A - All have sinned

Many of you will recognise that phrase as part of a well-known Bible verse, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). It is not a very popular statement today. Few people want to think of themselves as sinners, and many would like to edit the word out of any presentation of the gospel. The rather large problem with that approach is that the gospel is all about concepts like forgiveness, salvation and being set free. None of those things make any sense if we don't think we have any guilt, are not in any mortal danger, and are in no way imprisoned or enslaved. Jesus Himself was pretty blunt at times on the subject of sin and God's judgement. This is an extended quote from Luke 13: 1-5.

"There were present at that season some who told [Jesus] about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And Jesus answered and said to them, 'Do you suppose that these Galileans were worse sinners than all other Galileans, because they suffered such things? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them, do you think that they were worse sinners than all other men

who dwelt in Jerusalem? I tell you, no; but unless you repent you will all likewise perish.”

That’s pretty plain speaking! All are sinners without exception. It’s not that there is no distinction, there are what we might call ‘big sinners’ – murderers or organised criminals. Then there are ‘little sinners’ – the proud and those who don’t always tell the truth. But Jesus is clearly saying that they, in fact **we**, will all perish without repentance and salvation. Paul spells out the same point in Romans 5:14, “Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam.” Adam was the first sinner. Our sins might be different in size and significance, but the outcome is exactly the same – death! The Bible makes it clear that we are all sinners both because we all have sin inside our nature and because sin comes out in our actions. Therefore, we will all be judged, unless something radical happens.

The verse we started with, Romans 3:23, said not only that we have all sinned but also that we all fall short of God’s standard all the time. That’s what falling short of the glory of God means. God made human beings to reflect His glory and we habitually fail to do so.

People tend to fall into one of two errors at this point. Either we believe we are not such bad sinners and so **we** do not need a saviour, or, conversely, we believe we are so hopelessly bad that God can never save **us**. Both mistakes are equally destructive, and Satan probably isn’t too bothered which one we make! They both result in us excluding ourselves from the gospel that God has designed to be available to all, and suitable for all.

When I was young, I got jealous of the gifts given to children in hospital over Christmas. I wanted those toys and wished I could be in hospital at Christmas to get them! My problem was that I didn’t fit into the category for receiving the gifts I so much wanted. Our problem with the gospel tends to be the reverse. In Mark 2:17 Jesus says, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.” This means that Jesus only came to save sinners. If we exclude ourselves from that category, the gospel is not for us and we can’t get saved!

So, the letter ‘A’ describes why we need saving. The next obvious question is, ‘How do we get saved?’ That moves us on to the next letter of the gospel alphabet.

B - Behold the Lamb

John 1:29 tells us,

“The next day John [the Baptist] saw Jesus coming toward him, and said, ‘Behold! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!’”

Jesus is not just the person who announces the gospel, He is also the source and the centrepiece of the gospel. Now, I suspect that John the Baptist didn’t understand very much about what the phrase, “The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”, really meant. John was a prophet, and there were many times in the Old Testament when God gave one prophet or another a message to announce that he (the prophet) didn’t really understand. Until Jesus had died on a cross and risen from the dead, nobody apart from God really understood what Jesus had come to do. Lambs were sacrificed on the Jewish altar every single day, so John would have known something about what sacrifices were for. One of the things they did was to represent God’s judgement against the offerer’s sins being punishable by death. But, at most, it was understood that the sacrifice of a lamb covered up sins, and the person was okay until the next time he did something wrong. A few offerings were made on behalf of the whole nation of Israel rather than

just one individual, but every offering had to be regularly repeated. There was no offering that had **permanent** effect, and certainly none that could be effective for the whole world.

In no sense were the sacrificial lambs used for Jewish sacrifices ever volunteers: they had no choice in the matter! A specially appointed priest took the animal, killed it and so made the offering. Hebrews 10:11-12 expresses it like this,

“Every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man [that is, Jesus], after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God.”

According to these verses:

1. Jesus is both the priest making the sacrifice and the sacrificial lamb as well.
2. The death of Jesus really removes sins and does so permanently.
3. The death of Jesus never needs to be repeated.
4. We can add from our verse in John 1 that Jesus sacrifice is sufficient for the sins of the whole world. Not that it guarantees that everybody **will** be saved, rather it makes provision so that everybody **can** be saved.

There are a couple of interesting verses in Revelation chapter 5 (verses 5 and 6) that read,

“Do not weep. Behold the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals. And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a lamb as though it had been slain.”

When you stop to think about it, you don't expect to see a dead lamb standing up! The point is that the dead, or slain lamb is now very much alive and active. This lamb, that John sees in a vision of future judgement, is none other than Jesus. Seeing Jesus as a slain lamb standing tells us that resurrection (rising from the dead) has taken place, and this guarantees that the salvation the gospel talks about has been completed.

John the Baptist told his followers that they should behold, or look intently and steadily at Jesus, and that in doing so they would see the Lamb that God had provided to remove sins. The gospel tells us something very similar today. The gospel does not tell us to do things to earn God's forgiveness. Going to church, giving to good causes, reforming our behaviour and learning to love other people more are all great things to do. But they never made anybody a Christian, or got someone into heaven.

You might say that our letter 'A' told us to look at ourselves and see what a hopeless mess we are. Letter 'B' tells us to look at Jesus, but not just to see how perfect He is, or to try and become more like Him. We are to look at how He died to take the punishment and death which our sins deserved, and completely removed them when He died on a cross for us. In seeing Jesus, we see the One who can be the Saviour we need.

Now we reach our third letter...

C - Come unto Me

Looking at Jesus and considering His greatness is a very good start. Beginning to understand why I need a saviour, and how Jesus might be that Saviour, represent great progress. But how do I actually get saved, that is, become a Christian in the sense that the Bible defines it?

Well, in Matthew 11:28 Jesus announces to His listeners,

“Come to Me, all you who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light.”

It's easy to understand how people who were physically standing in front of Jesus could come to Him, but what does it mean to us today, how can we 'come to Him'? Perhaps the simplest way to put it is that Jesus was inviting people to become His disciples, that is, commit themselves fully to trusting and following Him. That involves some essential elements that we can list.

- We have to believe that Jesus is who He claimed to be, the eternal God
- We have to trust what Jesus says, especially that He really can lift away the burden of our sins as a result of His sacrifice of Himself on our behalf
- We have to believe that He is alive and active today, otherwise He is no use to us at all!
- We have to give up any hope of making ourselves good enough for God, and commit to Jesus as our only possible saviour
- We have to confess to Him our guiltiness and ask Him to make us one of His followers

This list doesn't cover everything that a Christian does or believes. Nor is it meant to offer a step by step guide to follow. It just attempts to describe what 'coming to Jesus' actually looks like in the 21st century, or any other century for that matter!

There is a similar passage to the one we quoted a moment ago in John 7:37,38 that records,

“On the last day, that great day of the feast, Jesus stood and cried out saying, 'If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water.'”

The picture language Jesus used, indicates that when someone believes in Jesus and 'comes to Him', then the Holy Spirit comes to live inside that person. Since the Holy Spirit is God, and Jesus is God and God the Father is God, this means that God lives inside people who believe the gospel and become Christians. What that feels like, and what is involved, would be the topic of another series of talks and is pretty well impossible to explain to somebody who hasn't actually experienced it for themselves!

It's significant that the Christian gospel invites us to come to a Person, not a religion or a cause. True Christianity isn't a set of rules, or a list of theological propositions to be believed – although it involves some 'dos and don'ts', and a bit of theology! It isn't a philosophy to follow, or an ideal to aspire to – although it does contain a whole philosophy of life and there are plenty of ideals for Christians to pursue! At its core, Christianity is a relationship with a real person – Jesus Christ. If you have that relationship you can, and should, add the other stuff as well. But without that relationship the rest will just be empty.

The fact that the gospel is an invitation rather than a command is worth noting. Most of us dislike being instructed what to do. Nothing is more likely to put our backs up than an imperious command, but the gospel takes the form of a 'loving invitation'. But that doesn't alter the serious nature of the decision we have to make. Just because God is speaking to us quietly and gently, doesn't make what He has to say any less significant. This really is a 'life and death' choice. God may be offering rather than demanding, but turning down that offer, which we are quite at liberty to do, will have consequences that go on forever. In His patience and gentleness, God may give us decades to reconsider our decision, or wait graciously while we refuse to even consider His offer. But at some point, the decision we make will be final. The terrifying truth is, we have no idea which day that is. There is an old hymn, by George F. Root that contains the line, “Do not delay, but come”. The hymn is from the 1800s, but the exhortation is very much relevant today. Putting off

important decisions is seldom a wise thing to do. With one as important as this, it is a risk that really isn't worth taking.

Jesus addressed the invitations we read earlier to the weary, the heavily burdened and the thirsty. If you are weary, then come to Jesus to find rest. If you know somebody else who is weary, invite them to come to Jesus! The same goes for the burdened and the thirsty. Let's face it, the world today has many people who match those descriptions. They may live in any number of countries, speak a variety of languages, have widely different personal histories and experience and express their needs in widely diverse ways, but there is only one gospel, and it is freely offered to every one of them, including me and you. We may often have been rebuffed when we have taken our needs and problems to other people, but Jesus never rebuffed anyone who came sincerely to Him, and never will.

It is possible to give the impression that the gospel is defined almost negatively. It removes guilt. It lifts burdens. It satisfies thirst. These things are all true, and they are truly wonderful results of the gospel, but God intends to do much more than that! He intends to impart joy and fullness of life. It is no coincidence that the first miracle that John records in his gospel, and which he describes as, "This beginning of signs", is the turning of water into wine at a wedding feast to which Jesus and His disciples had been invited. Jesus was doing much more than sparing the blushes of the wedding planner! He was illustrating, from the start, that His intention was to bring about the complete satisfaction and fulfilment of human hearts. And, while that will only be experienced in completeness when believers get to Heaven, it is meant to start here in this world. It takes us back to the theme of Christianity being a relationship rather than a religion. Christianity shouldn't leave us feeling a kind of dour satisfaction that we have 'stuck to the rules' today, but a bubbling up of joy at being allowed the company of God Himself in our everyday routines. This is nothing less than the fulfilment of God's purpose in creating the human race, that we might reflect His glory and enjoy His company.

So, Christian's have a **simple gospel** to communicate. Perhaps it would be better to say, a gospel that can be communicated simply, so that even the young and most uneducated can grasp it. It is a **transforming gospel** that changes people's lives in the most remarkable ways. We have a **profound gospel**, more profound than the wisest can ever comprehend and that, although simple to explain, always rewards further consideration and deeper commitment. It is a **universal gospel**, since it is offered to for all, but a **free gospel** – at least it is free to us: infinitely expensive to Jesus. We have a **unique gospel** because it is the only one that actually saves and delivers people but, that makes it a **fatal gospel** to ignore! No wonder Paul said, in Romans 1:16, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes."

Conclusion

In a sense, we never move on from the ABC of the alphabet that most of us learned as little children. Every piece of language, no matter how complex, beautiful or learned, is based on it, and depends on it. To forget our ABC, would be to lose all that the ability to read and write can unlock. In the same way, we never move on from the ABC of the gospel. Every other blessing from God arises from it and brings us back towards it. While we shouldn't dwell morbidly on any sins in our past. Neither should we forget that we were once every bit as much a sinner as anyone else we may meet, and would be one still, apart from the grace of God in the gospel. We should certainly never stop looking at Jesus, both to wonder again at how wonderful He is, and to seek the ongoing work of the Holy Spirit to make us more like Him. We should keep coming back to Jesus time and again, especially when we have wandered away from following Him closely, as we all do at times.

Sometimes Christians are advised to, “Never move too far from the Cross”, that is, from remembering Jesus death and resurrection and how much we depend on them. It is very sound advice and one of the keys to a healthy spiritual life.

When I was a boy in Sunday School, we used to sing a short chorus about this ABC gospel. It goes like this,

*ABC. ABC. A stands for “All have sinned”, just like wicked Cain.
B says, “Behold the Lamb”, the Lamb for sinners slain.
C stands for “Come to Me”, loving invitation.
Here as plain as ABC is God’s way of salvation.*

Prayer

Heavenly Father, thank You for making the gospel of Your Son, Jesus Christ, so straightforward that all of us can understand it. If we haven’t yet believed it for ourselves, please grant us a clear view of our own needs and how You met them through the sacrifice of Jesus. If we already know Him as our Saviour, please keep renewing our trust in Him and increase our joy in Your company and His. We ask these things in Jesus name, Amen.

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on The Gospel of Christ Jesus – The ABC Gospel, talk number T1177.

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