

## What's So Good about the Good News? by Pastor Marty

Early this month, I saw the new remake of *Ben Hur*. To be honest, I wasn't sure I wanted to see it, concerned that Hollywood may have ruined it by removing the Christian message or even portraying God as evil as they did in *Exodus: God and Kings*. However, after reading a few reviews, I decided to go see it. I was very pleasantly surprised to see that they maintained the message of forgiveness and the power of God. True, they changed the story in a few places, but it was still worth seeing. After I saw it, I found myself thinking a lot about how we understand the Gospel. As Christians, we identify the core of our faith to be the Gospel. I would consider this to be consistent across denominations and worship styles—Protestant or Roman Catholic, Pentecostal, Charismatic, or Cessationist, liturgical or informal. We might focus on different approaches or themes when we describe it, but if we are Christians in more than name only, then we understand that the basis of the faith is the Good News. This is not the same as a congregation's specific calling, for one group may be called to minister to the poor and homeless, another to broken families, and yet another to education. Whatever their focus or styles may be, they all relate to the Gospel.

***Different churches may have different callings, but they all relate to the Gospel.***

This raises one major question, though: what do we mean by "the Gospel"? Depending on your background, you may understand it to be a bit different than somebody else. Some of you may think of the Gospel in terms of the "4 Spiritual Laws" or the "Roman Road" or simply the "Sinner's Prayer" while others might relate it to specific Church doctrines or the Nicene or Apostle's creed. The fact is that many of us may be sure we know what the Gospel is although we may not know exactly what the Bible says.

As an example, I want to examine what we all recognize as the core of the Gospel: Jesus died on the cross for our sins so that we can receive forgiveness and go to Heaven. Forgiveness and eternal life are commonly considered the most important "benefits" we receive for becoming Christians and living for God in this life. We may also include other aspects into it, such as peace and strength and healing . . . but if we were to take a poll of believers around the world, I am pretty sure forgiveness and eternal life would be at the top. How do we receive forgiveness or eternal life? Paul tells us to (1) confess with our mouth that Jesus is Lord and (2) believe in our heart that God raised Him from the dead, and we will be saved (Rom 10:9). Based on this one verse, many of us might consider this to be the core of the Gospel—believing the Good News.

***"Gospel" is confessing Jesus as Lord and believing God raised Him from the dead.***

If this is the Gospel, then we are done, and this is a pretty short newsletter. However, I am going to argue why I think we have not fully understood the Gospel. Using Paul's concept that everything should be confirmed by 2 or 3 witnesses, I am going to provide three scripture passages that indicate the Gospel is different than what we think. The first is from Romans. In this letter, Paul is writing to the Church in the city of Rome. It is important that we realize he is addressing the Christians there. He clearly states that he is writing to "the beloved of God in Rome, called as saints." This was a letter from Paul to the Church, and he was addressing believers. These were not nominal believers, either, for he says, "your faith is proclaimed throughout the whole world." He commended them for their faith, which has been a witness around the known world. They may not have been perfect, but they were not lacking in faith.

However, we find an immensely interesting statement only a few verses later. Paul explains that he has often wanted to visit them because he is “eager to preach the gospel to you who are in Rome” (Rom 1:15). This is very significant because he has made it clear that he is writing to Christians who are in Rome. If he had said, “to the lost who are in Rome” or “others who are in Rome” or even “those who are in Rome,” we could accept he might have been speaking evangelistically. However, he is writing to the Christian believers, known through the whole world for their faith, and he tells them that he eagerly desires to preach the Gospel to them.

***Paul is eager to preach the Gospel to the Christians (believers) who are in Rome.***

Before we can begin to understand why Paul desires to preach the Gospel to Christians in Rome, we need to rule out what he is not talking about when he mentions “the Gospel.” If the Gospel is the message of the crucifixion and resurrection by which people get saved, then the Romans already knew it. He already commended them for their faith, which has become a witness to countless others around the world. Paul seems to imply that the Roman believers need a greater knowledge of the Gospel. If the Gospel is the message by which someone gets saved, then the Romans would not need to hear it again. Granted, we may know people in our churches who need a better understanding of the message of salvation, but Paul wrote the letter to a group of believers whose faith was a witness around the world. Also, if the Gospel was solely focused on what someone needed to believe and confess in order to be saved, the Roman believers knew it; they were saved. The content of Paul’s letter indicates that they did not fully understand justification and sanctification, but nothing in the letter suggests that they doubted Jesus’s resurrection or that they were not actually saved. According to this passage, Paul indicates

that the Gospel is not only a message meant for Christian believers to share with the lost but also is something they also clearly need to hear.

***The Gospel is a message that Christians of all types need to hear and understand.***

Another person to discuss the Gospel is Jesus. If anyone knows the real meaning of the Good News, it is Jesus. He is the Author of the Old and New Covenants, and He personifies the Good News. Interestingly, we find that He gave His disciples clear instructions to go out two-by-two and (1) heal the sick, (2) cast out demons, and (3) preach the Gospel—the Good News. He gave these specific instructions to the twelve and then to the seventy. We sometimes forget He told them to do this before His crucifixion. This raises a very significant question: what was the “good news” the disciples preached? It was not that Jesus died for their sins, for He had not been crucified yet. It could not even have been that Jesus was going to die for their sins, for He had not even begun to talk to them about His death and resurrection until after that point. He also didn’t describe the preaching of the Gospel in terms of conversion. As we read the Gospels, we see more of a focus on conversion with John the Baptist than Jesus. John brought a message of repentance, but Jesus told them to take a message of “Good News” that included healing and deliverance. Of course, repentance leads to freedom, and there are certainly times when He calls people to repentance, but there seems to be a significant difference between Jesus and John—as we see when John, hearing of the miracles, sends his disciples to ask if Jesus is indeed the One. The message Jesus preached was different than John’s. If they did not preach the crucifixion and resurrection, and His focus wasn’t repentance and conversion, then what message did He have the disciples preach?

***If the Gospel wasn’t Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection, what did they preach?***

We see two places in the Gospels where the “Good News” is explained in a way that fits the message Jesus sent the disciples to share with the crowds. As a small boy with a blanket tells us, the first explanation is given to a group of shepherds on Christmas morning. It says the host of Heaven appeared to them in the field and told them the “Good News”—that a savior has been born to them, Christ the Lord. God has visited His people. Often we sing about this with the title “Immanuel” without recognizing the full meaning. This is a name of God given by Isaiah to indicate “God is with us.” The Good News to the shepherds was that God had come to earth. Sometimes we focus on the fact that the angels stated that the baby was “Christ the Lord” but miss the significance of the “born to you” part. The “Immanuel” God that Isaiah had described had been born on earth to live with us. This was the part of the message that the shepherds understood, and it did not make any reference to the crucifixion. Additionally, the wise men from the East came to celebrate the birth of a king with no mention of a cross. The Good News proclaimed by the angels (and even somewhat reflected in the stars) was that God had come down to reside with us. Jesus is the true “Ark of the Covenant” and “Holy of Holies” by which God abides in the midst of His people. We also have Gabriel mentioning the “Good News” to Zachariah when he explains that John the Baptist would prepare the way for the Lord. The Gospel was that God would be with us.

***The angels described the message of the Gospel as being “God will be with you.”***

Jesus fully affirmed Isaiah’s identifying “Immanuel” as part of God’s message to us. At the inauguration of His ministry, he had taken the scroll of Isaiah and publicly read a passage that describes the Gospel. The passage doesn’t mention His crucifixion and death, nor does it make a call to repentance or conversion. There are numerous passages in Isaiah that do, so He

could have chosen those if He desired. Instead, Jesus selects a passage that mentions the Good News in terms of God’s favor toward the poor and needy. There is certainly no doubt that the forgiveness of sins was part of the message, for we see Jesus proclaim that during His ministry. However, if we focus exclusively on forgiveness and neglect the rest of the message, we are not preaching the Gospel that Jesus preached. He proclaimed healing, deliverance, and adoption into God’s family. The central aspect of most of His sermons was the Kingdom of God, which is the Presence and power of God becoming real and active in this world and in our lives. He was continually telling people that the Kingdom of God had come and was within them. If we look at those verses and do a simple substitution by putting “Presence of God” and “power of God” wherever it says “Kingdom of God,” we begin to see what He was saying. The Gospel that Jesus instructed His disciples to proclaim is that God so loves His creation that He has come down in Person to restore and redeem what was lost. As John says, He came to undo everything that the devil has done to God’s creation (1 John 3:8). In place of sickness, He brought health; in place of demonization, He brought deliverance; in place of rejection, He brought adoption; in place of sin, He brought forgiveness; and in place of death, He brought life. He came to redeem us.

***God so loves His creation that He came down in person to restore and redeem it.***

Both Isaiah 40:9 and 52:7 also describe the Gospel as God’s Presence and power in and among His people. However, the book of Isaiah is not the only place in the Old Testament that gives us a glimpse of what Jesus wanted people to see. The term “redemption” reveals a great deal about God’s plan. Throughout the Old and New Testaments, God often mentions buying us back or redeeming us. This is significant, for buying something back (redeeming it) indicates restoring lost ownership. If we decide to buy a

new car from a dealership, the dealer owned it before us; it did not belong to us previously. We are not “redeeming” the car. However, if we lose the car to a finance company and then pay off the loan, we can say we bought it back from them. This is the meaning of the ancient term “to redeem”—to buy back something or someone from whoever took possession. In the Old Testament, God repeatedly describes His actions as redeeming us and buying us back. If this concept of redemption is part of the Good News, then what exactly was lost that needs to be restored? We can see clearly by looking back to the situation immediately before sin entered the world. God’s plan was for man and woman to be in a personal relationship with Him, and He was present here on the earth, walking with them and talking to them in the cool of the day. His Presence and power was in their midst. Sin created a separation between God and people, and Jesus provided a way to remove the barrier from between us. However, God likes to do big things, and He wasn’t satisfied with restoring us to the way things were; He went a step further. Instead of just being among them, He made a way to be WITHIN us as well as among us. THIS is the full and complete meaning of the Gospel.

***The full message of the Gospel is that God is within us as well as among us.***

This concept of the Good News explains a lot. If we understand the Gospel not as being what-we-need-to-believe-in-order-to-get-saved but as what-God-wants-us-to-know-about-His-Presence-and-power-with-us, then Paul’s letter to Rome makes a great deal more sense. There is no question why he would write to Christian believers in Rome and express a desire to share the Gospel with them: there is always more we can learn about God being with us. This also fits with his statement a few verses earlier in which he says he wants to impart some spiritual gift to them so they can be established; apparently, he discerned some aspect of God’s Presence or

power that the believers in Rome either did not understand or practice. He wanted them to be fully equipped with everything they needed to have that relationship with God, and the rest of the letter addresses some of their issues. Still, it is important to remember that his letter, which gives what is probably the most complete and detailed description of the Gospel in the entire Bible, is written to Christian believers who were identified as having a faith known throughout the world. If we want to truly understand what Paul is saying in this letter, then we must start to read it not as a roadmap of how to get saved but as a description of the restored relationship we have with God our Father—along with what it means that His Presence and power (i.e., the Kingdom of God) is both in us and among us.

***The Good News is that the Kingdom of God is both within us and among us.***

If we consider the Gospel to be about relationship instead of conversion, does it take away from the crucifixion and resurrection? No, for there could be no relationship without it. If Jesus had not come, taken our place, and lifted us out of sin, we would have no forgiveness, no sanctification, and no hope. He is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, and we can't really know God without knowing His Son. Still, it helps us to understand many scriptures that otherwise may seem unclear. Jesus sent out the disciples to preach the Gospel to the poor, heal the sick, and cast out demons. His specific mention of the Gospel in relation to the poor makes more sense if we think of the Good News in terms of adoption and relationship with God: those who have the least possessions and suffer the most are the ones who need to hear that God is with them. Those who are sick or oppressed need to see that God’s power is available for them, and they were healed and delivered. The Gospel of the Kingdom of God is not just how to be saved; it is that God has come to us as our Father to be everything we most need, with us and in us.