

The Heart of the Gospel

Habakkuk 1:1–11, Acts 13:36–41

When Norma and I were on a walk yesterday we saw a van with a business name that got us to chuckling. The name of the business was A Painter Painting. A painter apparently was painting nearby. We thought immediately of the song that says “nine ladies dancing, eight maids a-milking, seven swans a-swimming, six geese a-laying.” We couldn’t quite get “a painter painting” to fit into that song, though we had a good chuckle as we tried.

But what about “a preacher preaching”? Isn’t preaching what preachers do? This should be the essence of the preacher’s business! There are three types of sermons—expository, topical and textual—and there are many different preaching styles. But unless a sermon communicates one thing, it fails to be a Christian sermon. It may be insightful or motivating, it may even move a person to tears, but if it lacks one thing, it is not a Christian sermon. That one thing is the *gospel*—the good news of Jesus Christ. The word comes from Old English *gōdspel*, from *gōd* good + *spell* story. The gospel is the *good* story—the best story of all—the story of how the God of glory undertook the salvation of sinful men. God did not leave our sinful race to perish in our sins. He sent the eternal Son, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, to come to earth and become man and go to the cross and die in the sinner’s place. This is the essence of the apostle Paul’s sermon in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia. We have spent a number of weeks looking at Paul’s sermon. It seems to have been included as a typical example of apostolic preaching. Paul was certainly “a preacher preaching”!

As we read this sermon we marvel at Paul’s mastery of Scripture. Remember, this was in the days before printed Bibles. Nowadays, if a missionary goes to the field, he takes his Bible with him. But think of what things were like, technology-wise, in Paul’s day. There were no mass-produced Bibles. Gutenberg had not yet invented moveable type. There were no books as we know them. The text of Scripture had to be painstakingly copied onto scrolls made of papyrus or parchment. These were bulky and very expensive. There were no scrolls of the complete Bible. It would have been physically impossible to copy the whole Bible onto a single scroll. There were scrolls of individual books such as Isaiah. A scroll of the five books of Moses was very large and not easy to carry. Almost certainly Paul and Barnabas could not have carried any scrolls of Scripture with them as they traveled the then-known world. When Jesus was in the synagogue in Nazareth he was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. The scroll was probably placed on a special rack in front of him which would enable him to more easily roll it from side to side. The people waited patiently while Jesus found his text—no easy matter, as there were no headers or chapters or verse divisions. When he found it, he read it

aloud to the people, then closed the book, gave it back to the attendant, sat down and began his sermon.

But notice what is happening during Paul's sermon in Antioch of Pisidia. Paul delivers his sermon standing up. He summarizes the message of Scripture. He quotes from Psalm 89, Psalm 2, Isaiah 55, Psalm 16 and Habakkuk 1. He does this all by heart and quite spontaneously. He makes appropriate applications from the biblical text. He does this all by memory. Obviously the apostle Paul is a man filled with the Holy Scriptures. He is part of an oral culture. From his childhood he has heard the Holy Scriptures read in the synagogues and in the temple at Jerusalem. He has made a conscious decision to meditate on God's word day and night (Ps. 1). He is a man filled with the Scriptures. If you and I are to successfully take the gospel to our loved ones and neighbors, we likewise are going to have to be filled with the Scriptures. We must consciously endeavor to meditate on God's word day and night. We must consciously and deliberately endeavor to memorize portions of God's word. The church tries to do this as we recite the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer in worship. Families can do this around the dinner table. We talk about things that are important to us. Should not the Scriptures be all-important? Can we not take up the Bible after a meal and read it and discuss it with our family? What a privilege it is to be able to hold the completed Scriptures in our hand and turn to any Scripture at will. You and I, like Paul, need to be filled with Holy Scripture. We need to make a concerted effort to do this. May the Word of God be on our hearts and minds always! Preachers especially are always to be "preachers preaching," ministers of the Word, wherever they go.

Today we come to the last section of Paul's sermon. He has just made the point that the great King David had died and was buried, and his body lay in his tomb, but Jesus—he referred to him by name just once back at verse 33—was raised from the dead and saw no corruption. He died on the cross and was buried, but for him the tomb became the doorway to life eternal—and so it will be for all who are united to him by faith. This morning let us look together at three points: forgiveness, justification and acceptance. First,

1. Forgiveness

Here is Paul's conclusion: "Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through this Man is preached to you the forgiveness of sins." Notice that the heart of Paul's sermon is the gospel—the good news—and the heart of the gospel is forgiveness of sins. Here is the good news that every person the world over desperately needs to hear. But the gospel starts with bad news: "All have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). All have "sinned." This refers to every son and daughter of Adam, descending from him by ordinary generation, as our Catechism puts it: "All mankind, descending from him by ordinary generation, sinned in him, and fell with him, in his first transgression" (SC 16). This refers to

every member of our race save one, the Lord Jesus Christ, the seed of the woman, who inherited his humanity from his mother Mary but was not the biological child of Joseph but the Son of Almighty God. Jesus alone was totally without original sin and never committed sin. He, the sinless one, became sin for us when he bore our sins in his own body on the tree, the Just for the unjust. This is the gospel. Do you understand it? Do you believe it? The gospel starts with the bad news that you and I are sinners and cannot save ourselves. No amount of good works or of resolving never to sin anymore from this day forward can save us. Paul says, “Be it known that through this Man—Jesus—is preached the forgiveness of sins.” Forgiveness of sins is the heart of the gospel—but this is the sinner’s greatest need. This is the best news that anyone conscious of his guilt and undeserving could ever hear. Do you know that you are a sinner? Many people try to suppress this knowledge. They do not like to think of the fact that they are sinners; it is too unpleasant. We like to flatter ourselves by thinking that we are really not all that bad; *we* are certainly a cut above the rest of humanity. But if we think that way, we cannot be saved! We will surely go to hell. The gospel is *not* “you are better than other people.” Though a lot of people like to think this, that is not good news at all. If we have to be better than other people to go to heaven, then we can’t go there at all; we shall surely perish in hell for all eternity. That is just not good news!

But the gospel *is* good news—the “good story,” because it is true. “Through this man—Jesus—is preached the forgiveness of sins.” “Neither is there salvation through any other.” Every other religion, no matter how attractive it might seem, is false. There is salvation through Christ alone. He is the solid rock on which to stand; all other ground is sinking sand. Do you know that you are a sinner? Do you believe that you have no other hope of heaven apart from Jesus? Then this is the best news, and it’s for you: in Christ you have forgiveness of sins! “Bless the Lord, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits: who *forgiveth* all thine iniquities.” In Christ is full forgiveness. There can be no better news than this. This alone can relieve a guilty conscience. I, a lost sinner, can have the assurance even now that my sins are forgiven in Christ. Second,

2. Justification

Paul goes on to say that “by Him everyone who believes is justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses.” I am very disappointed that two of our fine modern versions, the ESV and the NAS, as well as other translations, leave out the word *justified*. Notice that Paul uses the word *justified* not once but twice. Surely this is intentional. Under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit God’s original sense is preserved. Every word of God is pure, and this one is not to be left out. The word in the original is δικαίωω, meaning to declare or pronounce a person to be just. Δικαίωω is derived from δίκη, *judgment, judicial hearing, judicial decision*—compare *verdict* (“true judgment”). It is related to the

words for *righteous*, *righteousness* and *justification*. *Right* and *righteousness* come from the Anglo-Saxon. *Justice* and *justification* are cognates and come from the Latin. Paul expressly declares that “by him everyone who believes is justified”—a terse summation of the gospel. There could be no better news: “by him everyone who believes is *justified*”—declared righteous in the sight of a holy God. This is a judicial declaration in the courtroom of Almighty God. Every single human being will at the last day stand before God in person and receive his just sentence. There is no higher court to which a person may appeal.

If you are convicted of a crime under our form of justice you have the right to appeal to a higher judicatory—a court of appeals, or even the Supreme Court. Our system of justice is imperfect, but it is better than anarchy, and God has ordained it for our human good. But Almighty God is the supreme Judge, and there is no appeal from his sentence. At the final day every single person who has ever lived will hear either “Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” or “Depart from me, ye cursed, into everlasting fire.” At the final judgment every human person will be eternally consigned either to heaven or to hell.

The law of Moses could not justify. Only God Almighty has the power to justify, and he promises that by Christ “everyone who believes is justified,” that is, declared righteous in his sight. How the heart of a person who knows that he is a sinner longs to hear that he is justified in the sight of a holy God! What Paul is saying is indeed good news: you can know in this life that you are justified, declared righteous in the sight of God. You can know that your sins were laid on Christ, that he suffered for your sins. And you can know that his perfect righteousness is credited to you, as it was to Abraham, who “believed in the Lord; and he counted it to him for righteousness” (Gen. 15:6). Here is double imputation: the sinner’s guilt is credited to Christ; his perfect righteousness is credited to the sinner. This is a judicial declaration; is it for you? Look again at the statement: “everyone who believes is justified.” It all hinges on the word *believe*. What does it mean to believe? To believe is to be persuaded of, to place confidence in. Are you persuaded that the Christ of Scripture is the Messiah of God who died for our sins? Do you believe in your heart of hearts that salvation is through Christ and no other? Are you willing to confess Christ as your Lord and King and serve him faithfully the rest of your life? Biblically, the statement “I believe, but I’m not going to obey him” is not faith at all. To believe is to say, “I know that Christ is my only hope of heaven, and from this moment forward I commit myself to serve him with all my heart.” There is no receiving Christ as Savior without simultaneously receiving him as Lord. If you believe in the biblical sense, then you are declared righteous in the sight of a holy God. “By him everyone who believes is justified.”

This is what Paul declared in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia. But there is a third element,

3. Acceptance

Paul ends his sermon with a warning: “Beware therefore, lest what has been spoken in the prophets come upon you: ‘Behold, you despisers, marvel and perish!’”

The gospel requires a response, it requires acceptance. God never intended to set the good news of his salvation before us and have us say, “That’s nice,” and then go on with our lives as though we had never heard. That’s what we do with junk mail. We take a look at it, throw it into the trash, and that’s that. The gospel is not junk mail!

The hearing of the gospel is a moment of crisis. It is as though our vehicle died on a railroad track and a train is coming. The point of impact is imminent. Our only recourse is to get out of the car and run as fast as we can. We can see the lights flashing. We can hear the insistent alarm—clang, clang, clang. We can hear the train whistle; it is loud enough to be heard for miles, and the train is barreling down upon us. The message is essentially *doom is coming; flee from the wrath to come*. We’ve got seconds to act. This is no time to say, “That’s nice; let’s have a philosophical discussion about this sometime.” It is time for action! As we approached the crossing there was a sign that said, “no stopping on tracks.” But our motor quit. There was a malfunction. The car stalled, and there’s no time to try to get it restarted. There’s going to be an immediate impact. Our only hope is to flee as fast as we can.

So it is with the gospel. You have heard the warning. The day of judgment is coming. You are a guilty sinner. You have broken God’s holy law. You have fallen short of his standard of absolute perfection. You are on your way to hell. You cannot attain heaven by your own good works. Your only hope is to put your trust in Christ. To fail to accept him is to reject him. To fail to act on Christ is to despise him.

Put yourself back in that scene at the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia—part of what is now the land of Turkey. Paul had begun his sermon with the words “Men of Israel, and you who fear God, listen.” He had gotten the people’s attention, and what he was saying made sense. He appealed to the Hebrew Scriptures with which they were familiar. He was using them responsibly, exegeting them correctly. He had spoken of David, the man after God’s own heart. He had correctly pointed out that even this great man had died, was buried and had seen corruption. But he had shown from Scripture that though Jesus had died and was buried, he had *not* seen corruption. God raised him from the dead. For Jesus, the borrowed tomb of Joseph of Arimathea was the doorway to life eternal. And such it is for us as well, if we put our hope and trust in Christ.

Paul is speaking to polite company, Jews and God-fearers who revered the Scriptures and courteously listened to what he had to say. Now he uses a very strong word: “Behold, you *despisers*.” This is not the language of politeness, calling his audience “despisers.” These were men and women that gathered every week to hear the Holy Scriptures. Why does Paul use a word that would be so likely to turn off his hearers? Because the stakes are so high. Hearing the gospel is a moment of crisis. It is a dangerous thing to hear the gospel, for it demands a response, and that response is acceptance. Paul is telling his hearers, “You are on your way to hell if you are depending on your obedience to the law.” There is only one way of salvation, and it is Christ. To refuse to accept him is to despise him. The gospel does not allow us to smugly say, “Jesus is just all right with me” and then go on with our lives. It does not allow us to say, “Yeah, that Jesus was a great guy, a great moral teacher, right up there with Socrates. If he’s your thing, that’s great, but I’ll pass.” No! What Paul is saying is: “Jesus is the only way to heaven. You can’t remain ambivalent about him. You can’t sit on the fence. There are only two responses: you can either love him or hate him. If you do not love him with all your heart, mind, soul and strength, if you do not receive him as Savior and Lord, then you must reckon with the fact that you despise him. “Behold, you despisers, marvel and perish!” Reject Christ and you will perish eternally. To reject the gospel is to despise God. You either love him or you hate him. There is no middle ground.” The word Paul uses is καταφρονητής, *despiser*, from the verb καταφρονέω meaning *look down on, despise, scorn, treat with contempt*. Paul is essentially quoting from memory the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, from Habakkuk 1. His quoting this from memory to people who would have heard these very words read in their synagogues shows that the first-century Jews, such as these in Antioch of Pisidia, were used to hearing their Bible read in Greek. It also shows that God approves the translation of his word into the common tongue. Paul’s word καταφρονητής, *despiser*, is not in the Hebrew but is in the Greek, and is sanctioned by its use in the inspired Greek New Testament text. But let us not miss its meaning: to reject Christ is to despise him. Many of the newer translations soften it to “scoffers,” but this is regrettable. You cannot sit on the fence with regard to Christ. Either you *love* him and worship him and dedicate your whole life to him or you *despise* him, plain and simple. To despise him is to treat him with contempt and disdain and think little or nothing of him. What God does not allow us to do with Christ is sit on the fence. The gospel requires us to accept Christ, to love him and crown him as our Lord. This is the biblical meaning of believing in Jesus. “All hail the power of Jesus’ name! Let angels prostrate fall; bring forth the royal diadem, and crown him Lord of all.”

How appropriate that we come to this text on Reformation Sunday, October 31, 2021, the 504th anniversary of Martin Luther’s 95 Theses that changed the course

of Western civilization. One of Luther theses, thesis 62, states that “The church’s true treasure is the most holy gospel of the glory and grace of God.” Yes, the church’s true treasure is the gospel. Without the gospel there is no church. A church that does not preach the biblical gospel is no true church. It is the gospel alone that offers forgiveness and justification; it is the gospel that cries out for acceptance. “This is a faithful saying, and *worthy of all acceptance*, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners” (1 Tim. 1:15). The biblical gospel is the truth that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. This is truth. It is historical fact. God took the initiative. “When we were yet without strength, in due time Christ died for the ungodly” (Rom. 5:6). Only in the gospel is there forgiveness. This is indeed good news for sinners!

The heart of the gospel is forgiveness, and without forgiveness there is no good news, only everlasting fire. Amen.