

Good News for Jew and Gentile

Habakkuk 2:1–4, Romans 1:1–17

We recently completed a series on the book of Acts which began four years ago this week. At the end of the book the prisoner Paul has finally reached Rome—a goal of his for many years. As he awaits trial he is permitted to live by himself in his own rented house. Paul calls the leaders of the Jewish community together and speaks to them of Christ. Some are persuaded, but others do not believe. Paul quotes a passage from Isaiah that describes Israel’s natural hardness of heart—something that is true of every son and daughter of Adam by nature: “The hearts of this people have grown dull. Their ears are hard of hearing, and their eyes they have closed, lest they should see with their eyes and hear with their ears, lest they should understand with their hearts and turn, so that I should heal them” (Acts 28:27).

1. Dull of heart

Ponder the phrase “their hearts have grown dull.” This is the devastating spiritual condition of all who are not born again by the sovereign working of the Holy Spirit: even though they may be very sharp mentally and may be highly educated and knowledgeable, they are utterly unable to understand and embrace the gospel. Their natural depravity has affected their hearts, ears and eyes: their hearts have grown dull; they are spiritually hard of hearing; and when they read the Holy Scriptures, they don’t understand it at all. This is the spiritual condition of millions of people the world over. This is the spiritual condition of many of your friends, co-workers and loved ones. If you, by grace, are trusting in Christ alone for your salvation, this once described you. This is an apt description.

A dull knife is not very useful. Have you ever tried to slice a tomato with a dull knife? You run the blade back and forth over the skin, and it won’t slice. If you press too hard, the tomato will suddenly burst, and juice and seeds will spray all over the place. So it is spiritually: if you have a dull heart you can read the Holy Scriptures repeatedly but can’t understand its message. Even though the Bible is “the word of truth,”¹ flawless and possessing life-changing power—and even though you might be reading or hearing it in your native tongue, the language of your heart—if you are not born again, your heart cannot comprehend it. The fault is not with Scripture but with your heart. If you cannot understand the Bible, you desperately need to pray, “Give me understanding, that I may learn Your commandments” (Ps. 119:73). That is what you need more than anything else: God-given understanding so that God’s word comes alive to you.

The Jews from Rome who came to see Paul at his rented house were civil and polite—and perhaps a little intimidated by the presence of the Roman soldier

¹ Ps. 119:43, 2 Cor. 6:7, Eph. 1:13, 2 Tim. 2:15, Jas. 1:18

guarding Paul. But they rejected the gospel which he had opened up to them from the Holy Scriptures. They clung to the types and shadows of the Old Testament sacrificial system rather than accept him to whom those types and shadows pointed. They rejected the Lamb of God who takes away and doesn't merely cover over our sin. Paul has presented the gospel clearly, but the majority of these Jewish leaders would not receive it. Paul is confronting willful unbelief. His response is direct: "Therefore let it be known to you that the salvation of God has been sent to the Gentiles, and they will hear it!" (Acts 28:28). Paul's future focus would be the Gentiles.

What an indictment against Jewish unbelief! Out of all the nations and peoples of the world, God chose Abraham the Hebrew and revealed himself to him, promising that through his Seed all the nations of the world would be blessed. The Jews would hear the Good News first. It would come to them in their own heart language. God would give them the moral law, the Ten Commandments, and the ceremonial law: the tabernacle, priesthood and animal sacrifices that typified and pointed to Christ. Day by day and week by week they would learn that they were sinners, and that their sins could be forgiven only by the shedding of blood—the blood of sacrificial animals that pointed to the ultimate, once-for-all sacrifice of Christ, the perfect Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.²

This morning we read the opening words of the book of Romans. My intention is that this be a single, stand-alone message. I am not beginning a series on Romans, as that is the book our men's Bible study is going through. But there is good reason that Romans follows Acts in the New Testament. In Acts the gospel goes first to Jerusalem and Judea, then Samaria and to the Gentiles. In every town to which the apostles go, they go to the Jews first. When Paul arrives in Rome, he reaches out to the Jewish community first. Surely Paul hoped that the Jews, who knew the Old Testament Scriptures, would recognize that Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled the messianic types and prophecies, and that indeed he was the promised Messiah—but most did not. This was a great disappointment to Paul. Yet he was convinced that God's word would not return void, but would accomplish God's purpose, and prosper in the thing for which he sent it.³ The unbelieving Jews were dull of heart, but God was going to accomplish his purpose anyway. This brings us to our second point,

2. Made saints

Paul had written this letter a few years earlier to the "saints" in Rome (Rom. 1:7). "Saints" here doesn't refer to persons formally canonized by a pope—deceased men and women who become objects of idolatrous veneration and supposedly intercede for people on earth. "Saints" here has essentially the same

² John 1:29

³ Isa. 55:11

meaning as it does in chapter 15:26, where Paul refers to a diaconal contribution that was taken “for the poor *saints* which are at Jerusalem”—clearly, living Christians.

“Saints” literally means *holy ones*. God himself is holy, in a class by himself, separate from his creation, separate from all evil. God alone is “majestic in holiness.”⁴ The uniqueness of his holiness is stressed in the repeated cry of the Seraphim: “Holy, holy, holy.”⁵ God is called “the Holy One of Israel.”⁶ But it is important to understand that things that God separates to himself become holy, too. In baptism God puts his mark of ownership upon us and claims us as his own. Children of believers, set apart in baptism, are “holy” (1 Cor. 7:14). Saints—those who look to Christ alone for salvation, as he is offered to us in the gospel—are a people set apart from eternity: “he hath chosen us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be *holy* and without blame before him in love” (Eph. 1:4). Saints are set apart from the world and declared holy by a holy God. “You are not your own . . . you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s” (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

The bottom line is this: if you belong to Christ, you are *holy*, set apart to God. You do not belong to yourself anymore, you belong to God. You are his, not just because he created you, but because he redeemed you by the blood of Christ. If you use your body to commit sin, you are stealing from God, using his property in the commission of sin. This past week I saw some very nice boats on Gull Lake. If I were to board one of those boats and take it out for a pleasure cruise, I could be charged with stealing, appropriating somebody else’s property for my own use. That, of course, is a violation of the eighth commandment, a very serious sin before the God of absolute holiness who is of purer eyes than to behold evil.

But the problem of using the human body, given to us by God, to commit sin, is pervasive—yea, all pervasive. As Paul will establish in the book of Romans, we are all sinners. “*All* have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23). This “all” is universal. Every member of the human race, born by ordinary generation, is a sinner. This is why we need a Savior. And the story of how God sent his Son into this world to save sinners is called the *gospel*—the good news. This is the story of how those spiritually dead and dull in heart are made “saints”—set apart for God’s worship. Who are these people? This brings us to point three:

3. Jew and Gentile

In the book of Romans the good news of Christ is for both Jew and Gentile. From God’s perspective the phrase “Jew and Gentile” represents all of humanity. Every single person on earth belongs to one of these two groups. From the mass of

⁴ Exod. 15:11; 1 Sam. 2:2; Rev. 15:4

⁵ Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8

⁶ Isa. 12:6; 17:7; 29:19, 23; 41:14, 16; 47:4; 60:9

humanity God chose a people in eternity past to give to the Son. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit—three persons yet one God—covenanted together to accomplish the plan of redemption. Out of the mass of humanity that would be born, the Father chose a special people to give to the Son. The Son would undertake to come to earth to suffer and die in his people’s place, and the Spirit would work to regenerate their spiritually dead hearts and bring them to Christ at just the right time. God chose Abraham the Hebrew and established his covenant with him and with his “seed”⁷—his spiritual offspring who would accept the promise of the coming Messiah by faith. Those who rejected God’s Messiah would be cut off from the covenant people, and believing Gentiles would be grafted in.

Paul says, “I am a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise.” From this we see that the gospel—the good news of Christ—is for all kinds of people. It is for both Greeks and barbarians. As we saw in our studies in Acts, “barbarians” were non-Greeks, people who didn’t speak Greek. The Greeks looked upon barbarians with suspicion—they looked down upon them; they considered them to be beneath them. But this was not Paul’s attitude. Paul knew that he himself was a sinner. God didn’t save him because he was better than any other person. Paul actually considered himself to be the “chief”⁸ of sinners. He calls himself “a debtor both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to wise and to unwise”—to both cultured sinners and uncultured sinners. Rather than look down upon certain classes of sinners, Paul calls himself a “debtor”! He felt an *obligation*, in view of his call from God, to preach the gospel to all sorts of men.⁹ This was his *duty*—a duty given him by the King and Head of the church.¹⁰ In this regard he followed his Savior. Though the eternal Son was equal with God, he “made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross” (Phil. 2:7–8). Here is the Creator—the possessor of heaven and earth, the second Person of the Holy Trinity, equal in power and glory to the Father—the exalted being who sits at the pinnacle of power in the universe. “All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.”¹¹ In Colossians Paul attests that “he is before all things, and by him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it pleased the Father that in him should all fulness dwell.”¹² Yet the Lord of glory humbled himself, and took upon him the

⁷ Gen. 17:9

⁸ 1 Tim. 1:15

⁹ Rephrased from Gill, commentary on Rom. 1:14 (e-Sword)

¹⁰ *Enhanced Strong’s Lexicon*, ὀφειλέτης (Logos Bible Software)

¹¹ John 1:3

¹² Col. 1:17–19

form of a servant. What condescension! He took upon himself our common humanity and bore our sins upon the cross. Jesus doesn't put down barbarians—and neither should we.

The church, therefore, should be anything but class conscious. Abraham is commended as one who would “keep the way of the LORD, to do justice and judgment” (Gen. 18:19). Note that doing justice and judgment—for all people—is the way of the LORD—God's way. In Exodus 23:6 judges are warned, “Thou shalt not wrest the judgment of thy poor in his cause” (Ex. 23:6). The verb translated “wrest” has a basic meaning of *stretch out*, and in this instance means *pervert* or *warp* justice—stretch it till it is unrecognizable.¹³ Human judges are not to pervert justice because either accuser or accused belongs to a particular people group. Perverting justice to benefit this or that party has the effect of diminishing respect for the law. The Christian is to treat all people with dignity and respect, no matter their social class, not giving preference to the rich, high born, or powerful, over against another from a lower class. It is significant that rather than looking with disdain upon certain classes of sinners, Paul calls himself a “debtor.” He saw his duty to preach the gospel as a privilege given him by the King and Lord of the church.

4. Good news

Verses 16–17 are the key verses of Romans: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ, for it is the power of God to salvation for everyone who believes, for the Jew first and also for the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, ‘The just shall live by faith.’” Here is the theme of the book of Romans: the gospel of Christ. Here is the truth that gripped the heart of Luther, a man who agonized over how he, a sinner, could be made right before a holy God. As he studied these verses in Romans, the Lord shone the light of the gospel into his heart. What is the gospel? The good news of Jesus Christ. Both the Greek and the English words mean *good news*. The Greek word εὐαγγέλιον literally means *beautiful announcement*. The English word *gospel* means either *God's story*, or *the best story*—a story worthy of God. Both are “beautiful words, wonderful words, wonderful words of life.”¹⁴

What is the gospel? It is the story of Christ. As Paul explains in 1 Corinthians 15, “Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the *gospel* which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures.”

¹³ William L. Halladay, *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, נָטָה (Logos Bible Software)

¹⁴ P. P. Bliss (1874), https://hymnary.org/text/sing_them_over_again_to_me_wonderful, accessed 7-1-23

The gospel is thus the story of Christ. The gospel is about what *Christ* has done, not about what *we* do. The gospel is not: You can save yourself. Neither is it: You can save yourself with Christ's help. The gospel is about Christ's saving work. Christ died for our sins, he was buried, and rose again the third day. These events are not some random fluke. No! "Christ died for our sins *according to the scriptures* . . . he was buried, and . . . he rose again the third day *according to the scriptures*." His sacrificial death was planned in eternity past, when the Father gave to the Son an elect people. Christ acknowledged this in the Garden of Gethsemane in his prayer to the Father just hours before his crucifixion, when he said, "I pray for them: I pray not for the world, but for them which thou hast given me; for they are thine" (John 17:9). As Jesus prepared spiritually for the great task of offering up himself an atoning sacrifice for the sins of his people he prayed "*not* for the world," but for his elect people, given to him by the Father: "them which thou hast given me." His death, as well as his intercession, was on behalf of those people, out of the mass of all humanity, that the Father had given him in eternity past.

Paul speaks of the gospel when he said, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ." The words "of Christ" are missing in the Alexandrian texts and in most modern translations but are found in hundreds of Byzantine texts that were in constant use in the Greek churches. The gospel of which Paul speaks is the gospel of Christ. Paul is especially clear on this: there is only one gospel; if anyone comes preaching another gospel, it must be rejected (Gal. 1:8–9).

Paul says, "I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ." Here is Paul's attitude toward the gospel: he is not ashamed of it; on the contrary, he *glories* in it. "God forbid that I should *glory*, save in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Gal. 6:14). The gospel is the only way of salvation for lost sinners. It is our only hope. It is indeed good news. How is it received? That takes us to point five,

5. By faith

The gospel is "the power of God to salvation for everyone who *believes*, for the Jew first and also for the Greek." These are glorious words, but Paul doesn't want us to accept them based only on his own authority. He grounds his statement in Scripture, showing us that what he is proclaiming is nothing other than God's truth revealed centuries before by his holy prophet. Quoting Habakkuk 2:4 Paul says that in the gospel "the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, 'The just shall live by faith.'"

A lot of Christians would be hard pressed to remember the particulars of the book of Habakkuk. It is one of the minor prophets, so called, not because what they wrote was unimportant but because their books were shorter. Habakkuk asks, why does God let people get away with evil? He grapples with how God's anger and justice relate to his love and mercy. He concludes that God will always render

a righteous judgment in the end.¹⁵ His book closes with a song, reminiscent of the book of Psalms, offering words of hope: “I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.” But in the middle of his book Habakkuk, writing under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, includes this prescient observation: “Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith.” Here is a contrast between two people; one will remain in spiritual death and go to hell, the other, born again by the Holy Spirit, will be rescued from hell and go to heaven. Given the righteousness of Christ as a free gift, “the just shall live by his faith.”

Here is the believer’s only hope: the righteousness of Christ credited to an undeserving sinner. How is it received: by faith. The just (the justified one) will live (that is, come to life, pass from death to life) by faith.

Sinner, your only hope is to look to Christ in faith. Look to him who alone saves guilty, hell-bound sinners. This is good news for both Jew and Gentile. Amen.

¹⁵ Adapted from *The Books of the Bible Made Easy* (Rose Publishing, 2018)