

GOD
IS THE
GOSPEL

MEDITATIONS ON GOD'S LOVE
AS THE GIFT OF HIMSELF

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God Is the Gospel

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INTRODUCTION: WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS MOST—THE GOSPEL'S GREATEST GIFT, GOD

Today—as in every generation—it is stunning to watch the shift away from God as the all-satisfying gift of God's love. It is stunning how seldom God himself is proclaimed as the greatest gift of the gospel. But the Bible teaches that the best and final gift of God's love is the enjoyment of God's beauty. "One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD and to inquire in his temple" (Ps. 27:4). The best and final gift of the gospel is that we gain Christ. "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8). This is the all-encompassing gift of God's love through the gospel—to see and savor the glory of Christ forever.

In place of this, we have turned the love of God and the gospel of Christ into a divine endorsement of our delight in many lesser things, especially the delight in our being made much of. The acid test of biblical God-centeredness—and faithfulness to the gospel—is this: Do you feel more loved because God makes much of you, or because, at the cost of his Son, he enables you to enjoy making much of him forever? Does your happiness hang on seeing the cross of

Christ as a witness to your worth, or as a way to enjoy God's worth forever? Is God's glory in Christ the foundation of your gladness?

From the first sin in the Garden of Eden to the final judgment of the great white throne, human beings will continue to embrace the love of God as the gift of everything but himself. Indeed there are ten thousand gifts that flow from the love of God. The gospel of Christ proclaims the news that he has purchased by his death ten thousand blessings for his bride. But none of these gifts will lead to final joy if they have not first led to God. And not one gospel blessing will be enjoyed by anyone for whom the gospel's greatest gift was not the Lord himself.

IS DIVINE LOVE THE ENDORSEMENT OF SELF-ADMIRATION?

The sad thing is that a radically man-centered view of love permeates our culture and our churches. From the time they can toddle we teach our children that feeling loved means feeling made much of. We have built whole educational philosophies around this view of love—curricula, parenting skills, motivational strategies, therapeutic models, and selling techniques. Most modern people can scarcely imagine an alternative understanding of feeling loved other than feeling made much of. If you don't make much of me you are not loving me.

But when you apply this definition of love to God, it weakens his worth, undermines his goodness, and steals our final satisfaction. If the enjoyment of God himself is not the final and best gift of love, then God is not the greatest treasure, his self-giving is not the highest mercy, the gospel is not the good news that sinners may enjoy their Maker, Christ did not suffer to bring us to God, and our souls must look beyond him for satisfaction.

This distortion of divine love into an endorsement of self-admiration is subtle. It creeps into our most religious acts. We claim to be praising God because of his love for us. But if his love for us is at bottom his making much of us, who is really being praised? We are willing to be God-centered, it seems, as long as God is man-

centered. We are willing to boast in the cross as long as the cross is a witness to our worth. Who then *is* our pride and joy?¹

GREAT SELF OR GREAT SPLENDOR?

Our fatal error is believing that wanting to be happy means wanting to be made much of. It feels so good to be affirmed. But the good feeling is finally rooted in the worth of self, not the worth of God. This path to happiness is an illusion. And there are clues. There are clues in every human heart even before conversion to Christ. One of those clues is that no one goes to the Grand Canyon or to the Alps to increase his self-esteem. That is not what happens in front of massive deeps and majestic heights. But we do go there, and we go for joy. How can that be, if being made much of is the center of our health and happiness? The answer is that it is not the center. In wonderful moments of illumination there is a witness in our hearts: soul-health and great happiness come not from beholding a great self but a great splendor.

THE HIGHEST, BEST, FINAL, DECISIVE GOOD IN THE GOSPEL

The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals what that splendor is. Paul calls it the “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). Two verses later he calls it “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

When I say that *God Is the Gospel* I mean that the highest, best, final, decisive good of the gospel, without which no other gifts would be good, is the glory of God in the face of Christ revealed for our everlasting enjoyment. The saving love of God is God's commitment to do everything necessary to enthrall us with what is most deeply and durably satisfying, namely himself. Since we are sinners and have no

¹ I will deal with the question of proper joy in God's gifts, including people, in Chapter Ten. For now consider, for example, that when Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:19, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?” the question still remains: What is the ultimate source or ground or bottom or goal of his joy? There is no dispute that people bring us joy. There is no dispute that our own clear conscience is a source of joy (Rom. 14:22). The question is: How does this joy relate to God? Are these things a cause of joy because they show us more of him or lead us toward him? Or is he a joy because he leads us to them?

right and no desire to be enthralled with God, therefore God's love enacted a plan of redemption to provide that right and that desire. The supreme demonstration of God's love was the sending of his Son to die for our sins and to rise again so that sinners might have the right to approach God and might have the pleasure of his presence forever.

In order for the Christian gospel to be good news it must provide an all-satisfying and eternal gift that undeserving sinners can receive and enjoy. For that to be true, the gift must be three things. First, the gift must be purchased by the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Our sins must be covered, and the wrath of God against us must be removed, and Christ's righteousness must be imputed to us. Second, the gift must be free and not earned. There would be no good news if we had to merit the gift of the gospel. Third, the gift must be God himself, above all his other gifts.

It would be a misunderstanding of this book if it were seen as minimizing the battles being fought for a biblical understanding of the *ways and means* God has used in the accomplishment and application of redemption.² The fact that this book is focusing on the infinite value of the ultimate goal of the gospel should increase, rather than decrease, our commitment not to compromise the great gospel means God used to get us there.

The gospel is the good news of our final and full enjoyment of the glory of God in the face of Christ. That this enjoyment had to be purchased for sinners at the cost of Christ's life makes his glory shine all the more brightly. And that this enjoyment is a free and unmerited gift makes it shine more brightly still. But the price Jesus paid for the gift and the unmerited freedom of the gift are not the gift. The gift is Christ himself as the glorious image of God—seen and savored with everlasting joy.

² Another way to say this is that *all* of John Murray's classic statement on *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), is crucial, not just the concluding section on "glorification." Our views of the necessity, nature, perfection, and extent of the atonement, and our views of effectual calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and union with Christ are crucial. Nothing I say in this book should be construed to minimize these essential biblical truths. If anything, I hope the preciousness of the goal (seeing and savoring God himself) will make us more vigilant to preserve the truth of the means.

WOULD YOU BE HAPPY IN HEAVEN IF CHRIST WERE NOT THERE?

The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ was not there?

And the question for Christian leaders is: Do we preach and teach and lead in such a way that people are prepared to hear that question and answer with a resounding *No*? How do we understand the gospel and the love of God? Have we shifted with the world from God's love as the gift of himself to God's love as the gift of a mirror in which we like what we see? Have we presented the gospel in such a way that the gift of the glory of God in the face of Christ is marginal rather than central and ultimate? If so, I pray that this book might be one way God wakens us to see the supreme value and importance of "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." I pray that our ministries would have the same focal point as the ministry of John Owen, the great Puritan writer of the seventeenth century. Richard Daniels said of him:

There is one motif so important to John Owen, so often and so broadly cited by him, that the writer would go so far as to call it the focal point of Owen's theology . . . namely, the doctrine that in the gospel we behold, by the Christ-given Holy Spirit, the glory of God "in the face of Christ" and are thereby changed into his image.³

ARE WE PREPARING PEOPLE FOR HEAVEN?

Can we really say that our people are being prepared for heaven where Christ himself, not his gifts, will be the supreme pleasure? And if our people are unfit for that, will they even go there? Is not

³ Richard Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 92.

the faith that takes us to heaven the foretaste of the feast of Christ? J. C. Ryle once preached a sermon called “Christ Is All” based on Colossians 3:11. In it he said:

But alas, how little fit for heaven are many who talk of ‘going to heaven’ when they die, while they manifestly have no saving faith, and no real acquaintance with Christ. You give Christ no honor here. You have no communion with Him. You do not love Him. Alas! what could you do in heaven? It would be no place for you. Its joys would be no joys for you. Its happiness would be a happiness into which you could not enter. Its employments would be a weariness and burden to your heart. Oh, repent and change before it be too late!⁴

Nothing fits a person to be more useful on earth than to be more ready for heaven. This is true because readiness for heaven means taking pleasure in beholding the Lord Jesus, and beholding the glory of the Lord means being changed into his likeness (2 Cor. 3:18). Nothing would bless this world more than more people who are more like Christ. For in likeness to Christ the world might see Christ.

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS MOST

When we celebrate the gospel of Christ and the love of God, and when we lift up the gift of salvation, let us do it in such a way that people will see through it to God himself. May those who hear the gospel from our lips know that salvation is the blood-bought gift of seeing and savoring the glory of Christ. May they believe and say, “Christ is all!” Or, to use the words of the psalmist, “May those who love your salvation say evermore, ‘God is great!’” (Ps. 70:4). Not mainly, “Salvation is great,” but “God is great!”

May the church of Jesus Christ say with increasing intensity, “The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup” (Ps. 16:5). “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:1). “We would

⁴ J. C. Ryle in a sermon titled “Christ is All,” from Colossians 3:11. *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (1877; reprint, Moscow, Ida.: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2001), 384.

rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:23).

The world needs nothing more than to see the worth of Christ in the work and words of his God-besotted people. This will come to pass when the church awakens to the truth that the saving love of God is the gift of himself, and that God himself is the gospel.

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

L U K E 2 : 1 0 - 1 1

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel. . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.

I C O R I N T H I A N S 1 5 : 1 - 4

THE GOSPEL— PROCLAMATION AND EXPLANATION

I pray that one of the effects of this book will be that the gospel of Jesus Christ is heralded—proclaimed, announced, declared, broadcast—in all its magnificent fullness for all the world to hear. That is what a person does who has heard good news. He tells it. And *gospel* means good news. Good news is for proclaiming—for heralding the way an old-fashioned town crier would do.

Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye! All rebels, insurgents, dissidents, and protesters against the King! Hear the royal decree! A great day of reckoning is coming, a day of justice and vengeance. But now hear this, all inhabitants of the King's realm! Amnesty is herewith published by the mercy of your Sovereign. A price has been paid. All debts may be forgiven. All rebellion absolved. All dishonor pardoned. None is excluded from this offer. Lay down the weapons of rebellion, kneel in submission, receive the royal amnesty as a gift of imperial love, swear fealty to your sovereign, and rise a free and happy subject of your King.

NEWS! NEWS! NEWS!

The word for gospel in the New Testament is *euangelion* (εὐαγγέλιον). It's built out of a prefix that means good or joyful and a root word that means message or news. The word was used

widely in the New Testament world to mean “the message of victory, but also used of political and private messages bringing joy.”¹ In a period of history without print media or radio or television, the messenger with the good news delivered the news in person. It was spoken as an announcement. It had a celebrative feel to it. The messenger exulted over the news he had to bring. It was *good* news.

It is easy in our day to lose the sense of wonder and amazement at the news quality of the gospel. If we would feel what the good news of the New Testament really was, we should not forget the way it was announced in Luke 2:10-11: “The angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you *good news* of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.’”

When this news landed on the earth, the effect was extraordinary—because the news was extraordinary. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Nothing like it has ever happened since. Something absolutely new had entered history. One could even say, a whole new history began with the coming of Jesus.

WHY ARE THE PRISONERS REJOICING? NEWS!

Consider another picture of the gospel arriving. This time not the ancient town crier, but a modern prison camp. Imagine American prisoners of war held behind barbed wire in a camp with little food and filthy conditions near the end of the Second World War.² On the outside of the fence the captors are free and go about their business as though they don’t have a care. Inside the fence the captured soldiers are thin, hollow-eyed, unshaven, and dirty. Some die each day.

Then somehow a shortwave radio is smuggled into one of the barracks. There is connection with the outside world and the progress of the war. Then one day the captors on the outside of the

¹ Ulrich Becker, “Gospel, Evangelize, Evangelist,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols., ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1986), 2:107.

² I first heard this analogy from Ray Bakke told in relation to ministry in the urban centers of our country. I have adapted it for use here.

fence see something very strange. Inside the fence the weak, dirty, unshaved American soldiers are smiling and laughing, and a few who have the strength give a whoop and throw tin pans into the air.

What makes this so strange to everyone outside the fence is that nothing has changed. These American soldiers are still in captivity. They still have little food and water. And many are still sick and dying. But what the captors don't know is that what these soldiers do have is news. The enemy lines have been broken through. The decisive battle of liberation has been fought. And the liberating troops are only miles away from the camp. Freedom is imminent.

This is the difference that news makes. Christians have heard the news that Christ has come into the world and has fought the decisive battle to defeat Satan and death and sin and hell. The war will be over soon, and there is no longer any doubt as to who will win. Christ will win, and he will liberate all those who have put their hope in him.

The good news is not that there is no pain or death or sin or hell. There is. The good news is that the King himself has come, and these enemies have been defeated, and if we trust in what he has done and what he promises, we will escape the death sentence and see the glory of our Liberator and live with him forever. This news fills us with hope and joy (Rom. 15:13) and frees us from self-pity and empowers us to love those who are suffering. In this hope-sustained love he will help us persevere until the final trumpet of liberation sounds and the prison camp is made into a "new earth" (2 Pet. 3:13).

BUT WHAT DOES THE NEWS MEAN?

But the gospel is not only news. It is first news, and then it is doctrine. *Doctrine* means teaching, explaining, clarifying. Doctrine is part of the gospel because news can't be just declared by the mouth of a herald—it has to be understood in the mind of a hearer. If the town crier says, "Amnesty is herewith published by the mercy of your Sovereign," someone will ask, "What does 'amnesty' mean?"

There will be many questions when the news is announced. “What is the price that has been paid?” “How have we dishonored the King?” When the gospel is proclaimed, it must be explained. What if the shortwave radio announcer used technical terminology that some of the prisoners were not sure of? Someone would need to explain it. Unintelligible good news is not even news, let alone good.

Gospel doctrine matters because the good news is so full and rich and wonderful that it must be opened like a treasure chest, and all its treasures brought out for the enjoyment of the world. Doctrine is the description of these treasures. Doctrine describes their true value and why they are so valuable. Doctrine guards the diamonds of the gospel from being discarded as mere crystals. Doctrine protects the treasures of the gospel from the pirates who don't like the diamonds but who make their living trading them for other stones. Doctrine polishes the old gems buried at the bottom of the chest. It puts the jewels of gospel truth in order on the scarlet tapestry of history so each is seen in its most beautiful place.

And all the while, doctrine does this with its head bowed in wonder that it should be allowed to touch the things of God. It whispers praise and thanks as it deals with the diamonds of the King. Its fingers tremble at the cost of what it handles. Prayers ascend for help, lest any stone be minimized or misplaced. And on its knees gospel doctrine knows it serves the herald. The gospel is not mainly about being explained. Explanation is necessary, but it is not primary. A love letter must be intelligible, but grammar and logic are not the point. Love is the point. The gospel is good news. Doctrine serves that. It serves the one whose feet are bruised (and beautiful!) from walking to the unreached places with news: “Come, listen to the news of God! Listen to what God has done! Listen! Understand! Bow! Believe!”

DEFINING THE GOOD NEWS

What then is the news? What is the message that must be proclaimed and explained? To that we turn in the next chapters. But keep in

mind the angle of this book. Our question is not merely, what is the gospel? Our question is: What is the ultimate good of the gospel that makes all the aspects of good news good? What is the goal of the gospel that, if we miss it, takes all the good out of the gospel? What do we mean when we say God is the gospel?