

## WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

*It is Christ in all the glory of his person and in all the perfection of his finished work whom God offers in the gospel.*

*John Murray (1898-1975)<sup>1</sup>*

What is the gospel? This might on one level seem the simplest of questions. It is ‘glad tidings’ (*euangelion*). It is the good news of salvation. But this is also the most profound and glorious of questions. To outline the gospel is to touch on many of the most important issues we can ever face: sin, salvation, the holiness of God and the mercy of God. Clarity on this point is essential because increasingly terms such as gospel, good news and evangelical have been emptied of meaning. Self-professed evangelicals disagree over what the condition of humanity before God as sinners is, and what Jesus was achieving in His death on the cross. The gospel needs to be defined because there is no longer fundamental evangelical unity on its message.

The ultimate answer to this question is Jesus Christ Himself. Jesus Christ in all the glory of His person and work *is* the gospel. He alone is the good news that the gospel proclaims against the background of our sin. The gospel that Paul preached is none

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1. Murray, *Collected Writings*, 4:132.

other than 'Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures ... He was buried, and ... rose again the third day according to the Scriptures' (1 Cor. 15:3-4). His person, His life, death and resurrection constitute the 'good news'. But before we explore further the claim that Jesus is the gospel, we need to understand why the gospel is necessary at all. To do that we must begin with creation, with the world as it came into being through the Word of God.

## Beginning at the Beginning

When we turn to Genesis 1 and 2, we see that God created a world that was a theatre for His glory: 'Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good' (Gen. 1:31). This was a world unmarred by human sin. Humanity and the rest of creation interacted without fear (Gen. 2:19-20). More importantly, however, there was no distance or doubt in the relationship between God and man. Created by direct and intimate act of God (Gen. 2:7), Adam and Eve walked in fellowship with their Creator (Gen. 3:8).

Despite this creation of a good world with true fellowship between God and Adam and Eve, this happy situation was not to continue. God had given a command to Adam, a test of his love and obedience to God. God said, 'Of every tree of the garden you may freely eat; but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.' (Gen. 2:16-17) This was the instruction given to Adam. Bound up in this was the threat of physical and spiritual death if Adam broke the rule God had given him. Conversely a wonderful promise was implied. If Adam obeyed, eternal life would be his. The tree of life which granted everlasting life would have been his to eat from (Gen. 3:22), and he would have been confirmed forever in a state of holiness.

However, the promise of life dependent on Adam's obedience was never to be experienced. Genesis 3 tells us of the sad failure of Adam and Eve, and the consequent rupture that came into the relationship between God and His image bearers. Satan, the liar from the beginning, induced Eve to doubt the goodness of God's provision. With the false promise 'You will not surely die' (Gen. 3:4) in her right hand, she reached out, took and ate the fruit God had forbidden. In turn, Adam received the fruit from Eve and also ate. In this seemingly simple act, the first human couple rebelled against their Creator. They entered into sin by rejecting God's good commands. In succumbing to temptation, they lost the most precious thing they had, fellowship with God. Comfort and joy in God's presence was replaced with fear: 'I heard Your voice in the garden, and I was afraid because I was naked; and I hid myself' (Gen. 3:10). As Robert Candlish comments, 'the real cause of shame was not in their bodily [nakedness]... but in the guilt of their souls; and the real cause of fear was ... their liability to a far more awful doom.'<sup>2</sup>

## Understanding the Consequences

This one act of Adam had tremendous consequences for all history that followed. Some of that is outlined in Genesis 3. We are told that childbearing would now be painful (Gen. 3:16), that work would be hard (Gen. 3:17-19) and that ultimately all would experience death, for 'dust you are, and to dust you shall return' (Gen. 3:19b).

The most comprehensive account of the consequences of Adam's sin in Genesis 3 is found in Romans 5:12-19. The apostle Paul runs through the effects of the events of Genesis 3:

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2. Robert S. Candlish, *Studies in Genesis* (Repr.; Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1979), 72-73.

through one man [Adam] sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned... by the one man's offence many died... the judgment which came from one offence resulted in condemnation... by the one man's offence death reigned through the one... by one man's disobedience many were made sinners.

The wreckage left by the disobedience of Adam could not be starker. Quite simply, ever since Adam's failure, 'sin reigned in death' (Rom. 5:21).

Earlier in his letter Paul had outlined the impact of this. In Romans 1:18-3:20 he explained the effects of sin on the Gentiles (who did not have God's written teaching, Rom. 1:18-31), Jews (who did have God's Word, Rom. 2:1-3:8) and then he drew his universal conclusion (Rom. 3:9-20). (His conclusion is all embracing because everyone fits into either the category of Jew or Gentile.) For the Gentiles, the picture was bleak. God had continued to clearly reveal Himself in creation, so that all who refused to honour Him were without excuse (Rom. 1:19-20). However, this knowledge of God was universally rejected and suppressed in unrighteousness (Rom 1:18b). This rejection of God was manifested in the worship of idols, 'an image made like corruptible man – and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things' (Rom. 1:23b). It was also shown in embracing sexual licence, 'the lusts of their hearts, to dishonour their bodies among themselves' (Rom. 1:24). Because of their exchange of the knowledge of God for idolatry and immorality, the world was given over to a deplorable catalogue of behaviours: 'All unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers, backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful' (Rom. 1:29-31). This was where the sin of Adam

had left the world, hopelessly mired in corruption, and, as such, subject to the ‘wrath of God’ which is ‘revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men’ (Rom. 1:18).

If that is the miserable place where the sin of Genesis 3 left the wider world, surely the Jews, with their privileged covenant status and the Old Testament writings, were in a better position? In Romans 2:17-24 Paul demonstrates this wasn’t the case. There he discusses the Jews, those who ‘know *His* will, and approve the things that are excellent, being instructed out of the law’ (Rom. 2:18). Paul says of them that, however well they know God’s law, inevitably and invariably they break it. As Romans 2:21-23 says, ‘You, therefore, who teach another, do you not teach yourself? You who preach that a man should not steal, do you steal? You who say, “Do not commit adultery”, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who make your boast in the law, do you dishonour God through breaking the law?’ The answer to all these rhetorical questions is, yes. Outwardly, the Jews (and all who have God’s written teaching) fall short of what they know. Those who know theft is wrong themselves steal, or, if not actually stealing, they engage in coveting, or wrongfully desiring the goods of others (Rom. 7:7). Those who know sexual purity is required by the law, themselves fail to keep that standard. Again, if not failing in physical ways, they still fail in inward thoughts (Matt. 5:28). Paul is clear that the law is spiritual (Rom. 7:14); it deals with the ‘thoughts and intents of the heart’ (Heb. 4:12) as well as outward actions. Therefore, in thought, word and deed even those who know God’s Word fail. Jews as well as Gentiles fall into the category of those who ‘dishonour God through breaking the law’ (Rom. 2:23).

Paul leaves us in no doubt about the universal plight of humanity. He says: ‘We have previously charged both Jews and