

## THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

### Gold fever

On Jan. 24, 1848, James Marshall surveyed a ditch that was part of the sawmill he was constructing along the South Fork of the American River when he noticed a few metal flakes in about six inches of water. Much as he tried to keep it a secret, word soon spread: “There’s gold in them thar hills!” The news concerned the presence of something valuable, and prospectors the world over responded to it. Thus began the California Gold Rush.

The gospel, or good news, is like that. The gospel announcement and story reveals something valuable, the saving activity of God, and inspires a response to it.

Romans 1:16-17, which brings Paul’s introduction to a close, summarizes the theme of the letter. Every phrase except the first one is explored later in the letter. The most important phrase, which the other phrases support, is “the righteousness of God,” which refers to God’s saving character and activity. Paul in this letter expounds the righteousness of God so that the Romans may unite under the banner of the gospel.

Paul didn’t invent the key phrase. It occupies a prominent place in the sacred writings of oppressed but hopeful Jews.

Romans 1:16-17:

*<sup>16</sup>For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. <sup>17</sup>For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “BUT THE RIGHTEOUS man SHALL LIVE BY FAITH.”*

### Power of God

Paul’s statement that he is “not ashamed of the gospel,” which is preceded by the word “for,” must be seen in light of verses 8-15. Nothing in the preceding section indicates any inkling of shame. In fact, Paul bends over backwards to explain his eagerness to come to Rome. Paul had apparently surmised that people in the church reasoned that he hadn’t come to Rome, the seat of Caesar’s power, because he was afraid of preaching about a king other than Caesar.

Paul, however, isn’t concerned with the power of Caesar, because he believes in the power of God. God overpowered Rome, which crucified Jesus, by raising Jesus from the dead. Once again, God is overpowering Rome with the gospel, the news that Jesus is Lord. The power of God is so connected to the gospel that Paul can say that the gospel “is” the power of God, which means that the Holy Spirit is involved (1 Thessalonians 1:5).

The goal of the gospel is “salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” Paul is not speaking about how the gospel enables one to come to faith. He’s talking about how the gospel saves those who already believe the gospel. In verses 11-15, he said the gospel strengthens believers. In the conclusion to the letter,

which echoes the introduction, Paul says that God, through the gospel, is able, or “powerful,” to strengthen the Romans (Romans 16:25). In the same vein, the gospel saves them. Likewise, Paul urges the Galatians, who began by faith, to continue living by faith (Galatians 3:1-5).

Believers will be saved from the wrath of God, which is expressed toward human rebellion against God, and they will be saved for an eternal future with him (Romans 1:18, 5:9, 8:24).

Salvation is for Jews first and Greeks, or Gentiles, second. Paul may be referring to Gentiles as Greeks because of the pervasiveness of Greek culture. The salvation of both Jews and Gentiles has implications for the Roman church, the members of which must learn to accept one another (Romans 14:1-15:13). In Romans 1:18-3:20, Paul places the Jews and Gentiles on equal footing by demonstrating that both are in need of salvation. Salvation includes the bringing together of Jews and Gentiles under the lordship of Jesus Christ. The Jewish king is the king of the Gentiles as well (Romans 1:3-4).

### **Righteousness of God**

In verse 17 Paul explains the effectiveness of the gospel. The gospel is powerful to save believing Jews and Gentiles because “in it the righteousness of God is revealed.” The righteousness of God is a quality of God that he acts upon to save humanity. The psalmists and the prophet Isaiah in particular anticipate the revelation of God’s righteousness, which they link to salvation. God, in his righteousness, saves (Psalm 71:2, 15; Isaiah 51:4-8, 63:1). God revealed his righteousness by rescuing Israel from Egypt. Israel, oppressed ever since the Babylonian captivity in 586 B.C., longed for the revelation of the righteousness of God by means of a new exodus.

The term “righteousness of God” conveys his sovereignty in a way that evokes his impartiality as judge and his faithfulness to his covenant, or partnership, with his people (Acts 17:31, Nehemiah 9:8). As king, God is the just judge and faithful covenant partner. A good king acts on behalf of his subjects through judicial rulings. A good king also fulfills his covenant promises. In short, a good king addresses the problems of his people. We elect leaders to deal with our problems. All the world’s problems, and even all of Israel’s problems, stem from one problem: sin, which the scriptures define as rebellion against God.

In the context of Romans 1:16-18, “the righteousness of God” is in parallel construction with “the power of God” and “the wrath of God.” Each is a quality intrinsic to God that issues in action. The righteousness of God is in contrast to the “unrighteousness of men” (Romans 1:18). The story and announcement concerning the lordship of Jesus Christ reveals God’s righteousness—his saving character and activity—and enables men and women to respond to it.

### **Faithfulness of God**

The righteousness of God is revealed, literally, “out of faith into faith.” God himself reveals his righteousness in his faith, or faithfulness. Paul later will speak of the “faithfulness of God” as it concerns the gospel (Romans 3:3). The Greek word *pistis* can be translated either “faith” or “faithfulness” and may convey both meanings in the same

usage. The word “allegiance” fairly captures both meanings. The gospel was to bring about the “obedience of faith.” God, being faithful to his ancient promises, reveals his righteousness in the gospel. Such faithfulness comes to men and women, and they respond to it in faith—and even faithfulness, or allegiance. The NRSV aptly puts it this way: “the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith.”<sup>1</sup>

For Paul, human faith is both the belief in certain things—that Jesus is Lord and that God raised him from the dead—and trust-based allegiance to God (Romans 10:9, Galatians 2:20). He doesn’t speak of degrees of faith, as if a certain amount of faith but not some lesser amount demonstrated one’s right standing with God. Faith is either present or it isn’t. Either you believe the gospel or you don’t. We may want more specificity, but Paul doesn’t give it to us. He must not think we need it.

The phrase “from faith to faith” also resonates with the prominence given to the Jews in verse 16. Jesus said “salvation is from the Jews” (John 4:22). God entered into covenant relationships with Abraham and the nation that proceeded from him, Israel, in order that the Jews, through their faithfulness, would address the problem of human sin and bless the entire world.

In the gospel, a faithful Israelite, the Messiah, fulfills God’s plan on behalf of the nation. The faithfulness of God is seen in the faithfulness of the Messiah. God addressed the problem of human sin once and for all in the flesh of Jesus, who as the Messiah represented not only Israel but also the world. In fact, God condemned sin: He punished it, broke its power and brought its reign to an end (Romans 8:3).

When the Lord, speaking through Isaiah, anticipated the arrival of his salvation and the revealing of his righteousness, he spoke of the inclusion of foreigners in the covenant (Isaiah 56:1-5). The gospel was first preached to the Jews, who then preached it to the Gentiles. In these ways, the gospel comes from the Jews to the Gentiles.

As justification for speaking of the revelation of God’s righteousness in this way, Paul quotes the Lord from Habakkuk 2:4: “but the righteous man shall live by faith.”

The prophet Habakkuk was concerned that the righteous people in Israel, those covenant members who had remained faithful to God, were being oppressed by the wicked people in Israel. The Lord said he would respond by raising up the wicked Chaldeans, or Babylonians, to invade Israel. Habakkuk complained about this plan (Habakkuk 1:1-17). Habakkuk 2:4 is part of the Lord’s response to the prophet’s complaint. The Lord said that the righteous person, standing for all the righteous people in Israel whom Habakkuk was concerned for, should live by faith in him—by trusting him even in the face of such an outrageous plan.

Now, Paul says that the righteous person, or covenant member, and all righteous people, Jew and Gentile alike who believe the gospel, should continue living by faith in God, in allegiance to him and particularly to his Son, especially in light of the wrath and judgment of God against wickedness (Romans 1:18-3:20). The gospel, featuring a crucified Messiah, was outrageous in its own right. God, in his faithfulness, reveals his righteousness in the gospel just as he revealed it in Habakkuk.

Therefore, a “righteous” person in verse 17 is someone who already believes, not someone who becomes righteous by believing. The revelation of the righteousness of God, which concerns his faithfulness as seen in Christ, enables believers, further defined as “the righteous,” to be saved from God’s wrath and for a future with him as they respond in faith.<sup>2</sup>

Literally, Paul says that the righteous person “out of” faith will live. Is he referring to human faith/faithfulness or divine faithfulness? The believer lives both by God’s faithfulness and human faith (“out of faith into faith”), so the final phrase in verse 17 likely conveys both aspects.

### **Antidote to shame**

If the gospel of Rome, which proclaimed the lordship of Caesar, could have caused one to be ashamed of the gospel of God, what could cause us to be ashamed of the gospel in our day? It’s a different gospel, the gospel of the individual, which declares that no one has any business even suggesting how someone else should live his or her life. It is summed up with the adage, “Live and let live.”

Unlike the gospel of Rome, which was enforced by the power of the sword, more subtle powers uphold the gospel of the individual. Proclaiming the lordship of Jesus Christ in the public square invites ridicule and ostracism. If you want acceptance, respect and influence in our world, proclaiming the lordship of someone other than the individual is not the way to get it.

To proclaim the gospel is to be instantly associated not only with particular notions that muddle the gospel but also with particular individuals who espouse such notions. The leaders who are allowed to speak on behalf of Christ today are almost never the people I would choose. If you talk about Jesus, you’re liable to be labeled, and labeled falsely.

The gospel, even in its pure form, is audacious. It preaches that God raised from the dead Jesus of Nazareth, who now reigns over the entire world. Who’s going to believe that in this day?

Some of these subtle powers held sway with me a few years ago during a two-hour conversation with a friend in which I mounted a rather impressive defense for morality based on biblical revelation. I figured I would work up to the gospel story and announcement, but I never mustered the courage to say, or even imply, that Jesus is Lord.

The gospel of the individual even discourages believers from talking to other believers about the gospel. To talk about Jesus, and what Jesus means to you, or to ask someone else what Jesus means to them, even in church—well, that seems like crossing some line.

Over against everything that is aimed against the gospel is the power of God. Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because it is the power of God for salvation. The power of God is the antidote to shame. The gospel will be effective. It will overpower the powers. And it will be vindicated. If the powers of the age have persuaded us to imprison the gospel in shame, the power of God encourages us to turn it loose and let it do its work.

### **We’re being saved**

If the gospel is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, that means those of us who believe aren’t completely saved yet. We have been saved, yes, which guarantees future salvation. But we also are being saved. We live in a world that is in all-out rebellion against God. We ourselves, as believers in the gospel, find ourselves strangely bent toward rebellion against God.

Such rebellion deconstructs humanity. God, angered by this state of affairs, judges human rebellion, both now, to show it for what it is, and in the future. We need to be reconstructed. We need to get our humanity back. We need to be saved—saved from God’s wrath against warped humanity and saved for a truly human future with him.

We are, in fact, being saved. How? By the power of the gospel.

It behooves us, therefore, as believers in the gospel, to embrace it not just once but again and again. If familiarity is not to breed contempt, we must hear the magnificent story of Jesus, and how his story fulfills the story of humanity, with fresh ears, being attentive to angles we haven’t noticed before.

Perhaps most believers who grow dissatisfied with the gospel are not, in fact, dissatisfied with the gospel but with their conception of the gospel. They assume that what they believe about the gospel is all there is to know. It’s not the gospel that they find wanting but their inadequate understanding of it.

The story is so deep and so rich that we will never exhaust our knowledge or appreciation of it. It’s not simply a matter of learning new things; it’s a matter of learning new things that deepen and enrich our knowledge and appreciation of God. It’s a matter of salvation. New ears for the gospel story will enable us to hear the gospel announcement, “Jesus is Lord,” in a new way.

A new way to hear the story and the announcement is as a summons that unites all believers in the gospel under the lordship of Jesus Christ. This is not a new way but an old way. Certainly, it’s a way that Paul intended the gospel to be heard. But it’s been mostly drowned out by an individualistic culture and an individualistic way of reading Paul.

New Testament scholar Kenneth Bailey may have spent more fruitful time studying the Parable of the Prodigal Son, which itself illustrates the gospel, than anyone else. One can hardly consult any scholarly work on the parable that does not reference Bailey, now in his 70s. When he spoke during the Lamplighter Lectures here in November, I had the chance to talk with him about the parable. “I’m still seeing new things in it,” he said.

I take it he’s being saved.

## **The music of God**

The gospel story and announcement allows us to see what we must see in order to be saved: the righteousness of God. The English word “righteousness” has been weighed down with meanings that have obscured its beauty. Moreover, the phrase “righteousness of God” conveys images of a thunderbolt-casting tyrant or a taciturn, black-robed judge. We must not lose precious biblical words and phrases, but we must unload their baggage and recover their beauty.

We might, therefore, depict the righteousness of God, his saving character and activity, as the music of God—or, if we are to retain the royal nuance of the phrase, the music of the King. It’s from another realm, and was composed before time began.

God, being faithful to his ancient promises to heal the world, sent his Son, his King, and his Son sang the song. The gospel, both story and announcement, plays the music. When you hear it, you know it’s meant for this world and for this time. You know it’s meant for you. It does what you hope the music of this world will do, but never quite does: It heals your heart. It heals the world.

## **The song of faith**

So what do you do when you hear the music? You give your allegiance to the King who sang the song for you. That's faith. But that's not all. You sing the song yourself. This is also faith.

You embrace the gospel story in such a way that you live it out. The vocation of Israel, to suffer on behalf of the world and to be vindicated by God, was fulfilled by the Messiah and then passed on to us. Empowered by the Holy Spirit, we suffer and we endure, "always carrying about in the body the dying of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our body. For we who live are constantly being delivered over to death for Jesus' sake, so that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So death works in us, but life in you" (2 Corinthians 4:10-12).

Paul is saying in these verses that he himself, through his Spirit-empowered suffering and endurance, embodies the gospel, the death and resurrection of Christ, for the sake of others. We participate in the unveiling of the righteousness of God, which heals the world. We not only believe the story, we live the story. We not only hear the song, we sing the song. In other words, we live by faith.

A song from the 1970s goes like this:

*I'd like to teach the world to sing*

*In perfect harmony*

*I'd like to hold it in my arms*

*And keep it company*

*I'd like to see the world for once*

*All standing hand in hand*

*And hear them echo through the hills*

*For peace throughout the land*

*That's the song I hear*

*Let the world sing today*

*A song of peace that echoes on*

*And never goes away.<sup>3</sup>*

Even in its day, the song was a little hokey, made even more so by its appearance in a Coca-Cola commercial. But it resonated with a generation. And it resonates with the gospel. Jesus sang the song, and he teaches us to sing it. It's a song of peace—peace between God and humanity, and peace among humanity—now sung by countless singers. It echoes on and never goes away.

## **Genesis to Revelation**

What has particularly impressed me the last few years is the exquisite way in which the human story moves from Genesis, through Jesus Christ, to Revelation. If it's the story of humanity as fulfilled by the story of Jesus, it's also the story of God. When I see another connection, say, between Isaiah and Romans, I'm awe-struck by the artistry of God. I'm lifted up into God's presence. As the Holy Spirit, through the gospel story, allows me to see God and appreciate him, I hear the music.

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<sup>1</sup> Similarly, in verse 18, which parallels verse 17, something of God is revealed from someplace toward some people. Paul’s similar wording in 2 Corinthians 2:16 supports this interpretation. It reads, literally, “to the one an aroma out of death into death, to the other an aroma out of life into life.” The source is the death of Jesus, which Paul and other apostles carry in their bodies, so that the life of Jesus would also be manifested in their bodies, ultimately so that the Corinthians may experience the life of Jesus (2 Corinthians 4:10-12). Something comes from Jesus to the apostles, and something comes from the apostles to the Corinthians. Similarly, in Romans 1:17, something comes from God to people. Romans 3:22 gives credence to this interpretation: The righteousness of God is expressed through the faithfulness (*pistis*) of Jesus Christ “into” all those who believe. Romans 11:36 also lends support. Paul says, literally, that all things are both “out of” God and “into” God: They come from him and return to him, or are for him.

<sup>2</sup> In Romans, the believer is to live by faith instead of by the Mosaic Law, which God gave to the Jews but which has been fulfilled by Christ and is being fulfilled in his followers. Living by the law, which only the Jews received, separates Jews from Gentiles; living by faith unites them. In the immediate context, the believer is to live by faith instead of by ungodliness, unrighteousness and the suppression of the truth of God (verse 18).

<sup>3</sup> *I’d Like To Teach The World To Sing*, © 1971 by Shada Music Inc.