

# THE GOSPEL OF GOD

## Study Ten

### THE GOSPEL COMPLETED

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#### THE GOAL OF THE GOSPEL

The goal of the gospel—indeed of God’s whole plan and purpose for His creation—is to have a vast gathering of people to God:

After this I looked, and there was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, robed in white, with palm branches in their hands. They cried out in a loud voice, saying,

‘Salvation belongs to our God who is seated on the throne, and to the Lamb!’

And all the angels stood around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, singing,

‘Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom

and thanksgiving and honor

and power and might

be to our God forever and ever! Amen’ (Rev. 7:9–12).

This gathering together of people to Himself has been God’s intention from before the beginning of creation:

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love. He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ, according to the good pleasure of his will, to the praise of his glorious grace that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved (Eph. 1:3–6).

Concern for these people has clearly been at the heart of God’s gospel action:

For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life (John 3:16).

Certainly God is intent to manifest His glory and vindicate the holiness of His name in the face of evil and sin, but this is in no other way than by having regard for the holiness and righteousness of His people:

I will sanctify my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them; and the nations shall know that I am the LORD, says the Lord GOD, when through you I display my holiness before their eyes. I will take you from the nations, and gather you from all the countries, and bring you into your own land. I will sprinkle clean water upon you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses, and from all your idols I will cleanse you. A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. I will put my spirit within you, and make you follow my statutes and be careful to observe my ordinances (Ezek. 36:23–37).

In this way, God will ensure that He has a family of His children who are ‘holy and blameless before him in love’ (Eph. 1:4).

If the people to whom the gospel comes are so central to God’s own intention and action, to what extent are they part and parcel of the gospel message? What difference might this make to our understanding and practice of gospel proclamation?

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *Does our concern for the people to whom the gospel comes match that of God?*
- *If not, where then is the main focus of our concern in proclaiming the gospel?*

## **THE GOSPEL: A PACKAGE TO BE IMPOSED?**

It is convenient for us to think of the gospel as a package, that we can learn and familiarise ourselves with, and then impart to others. Paul the apostle does speak of ‘the form of teaching to which you were entrusted’, to which his readers had become ‘obedient from the heart’, which is clearly the gospel that sets people ‘free from sin’ and makes them ‘slaves of righteousness’ (Rom. 6:17f.).<sup>1</sup> The search for any fixed form of words or standard presentation of the gospel in the New Testament, however, proves elusive. Each occasion on which the gospel is proclaimed is in a different circumstance, to a different group of people. Compare, for example, Acts 2:14–42 (Peter in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost) and Acts 13:16–41 (Paul at Antioch in Pisidia), directed to Israelites, with Acts 14:14–18 (Barnabas and Paul in Lystra) and Acts 17:22–32 (Paul in Athens), addressing Gentiles. It is by no means ‘one size fits all’. The differences are due to the diversity of the peoples addressed, and their different situations. It appears that the proclaimers have in some sense got the measure of the people they are addressing, and pitch their gospel message accordingly. To be able to do this assumes some relational knowledge of, love for and fellow-feeling with the people being addressed. They are part of how the gospel presentation is formulated.

When we seek to bone up on the gospel so we can present it as a package, the resultant ‘gospel’ stays pretty much under our control, in ways we can mostly handle ourselves. This may be why we do it. Yet the gospel, and its coming to different people, is not a word or an action of us, but of Christ alive and active in this world. Some translations of Romans 10:14 read: ‘how are they to believe in one *of* [meaning *about*] whom they have never heard?’ (NRSV) but the more accurate translation is: ‘How shall they believe in Him *whom* they have not heard?’<sup>2</sup> Christ himself is the direct proclaimer of the gospel. The ‘word of Christ’ in Rom. 10:17 could equally mean the ‘word from Christ’. Christ himself, through the Spirit, is also the commander of gospel operations, in obedience to the Father, determining where the word will or will not go, and at what time, as in Acts 16:6–10:

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<sup>1</sup> See Study Nine, ‘The Obedience of Faith’, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> See Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1988, p. 390.

They went through the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been forbidden *by the Holy Spirit* to speak the word in Asia. When they had come opposite Mysia, they attempted to go into Bithynia, but *the Spirit of Jesus* did not allow them; so, passing by Mysia, they went down to Troas. During the night Paul had a vision: there stood a man of Macedonia pleading with him and saying, ‘Come over to Macedonia and help us.’ When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that *God* had called us to proclaim the good news to them.

There is indeed a ‘faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints’ (Jude 3), concerning Jesus Christ who is ‘the same yesterday and today and forever’ (Heb. 13:8). However, the gospel is not a package, but a movement and an action of the Lord gathering his people. This places gospel proclamation outside the limits of our preferred agendas and accepted patterns. This is not to say that the Lord may not use even set presentations of the gospel to speak directly to people of his choosing.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *What has been our experience of attempts to reduce the gospel to a set presentation to be imposed on others? How has this hit or missed those for whom it was intended?*
- *What has been our experience of gospel presentation geared relationally to others?*
- *What has been our experience of the gospel being outside our control?*

## **JESUS AND THE ONES HE CAME TO SAVE**

Jesus refused to dissociate himself from any who will be saved through him, even though it turned out to his own disadvantage:

Now all the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. And the Pharisees and the scribes were grumbling and saying, ‘This fellow welcomes sinners and eats with them’ (Luke 15:1–2).

Indeed he came to identify himself with them—not just in their good times, but at their worst. It was in what Jesus called ‘the judgment of this world’ that he said ‘I . . . will draw all people to myself’ in the ‘death he was to die’ (John 12:31–33). In that action of love he was made by God ‘to be sin’ (2 Cor. 5:21), as the one who ‘carried up our sins in his body to the tree [the place of the curse]’ (1 Pet. 2:24, NRSV footnote; compare Gal. 3:13). In all this, ‘Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end’ (John 13:1), refusing to dissociate himself from them in any way, or to let them go.

Ever thereafter, Jesus considers the ones he came to save to be a part of himself, and to be himself one with them in love:

For no one ever hates his own body, but he nourishes and tenderly cares for it, just as Christ does for the church, because we are members of his body (Eph. 5:29–30).

From now on, what happens to them happens to him. Saul of Tarsus was persecuting believers in Christ, not Christ himself (who was, as far as Saul was concerned, already dead and gone). Yet the risen, alive Jesus said to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute *me*?’ (Acts 9:4).

Jesus’ work was complete when he ‘had made purification for sins’ and ‘sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high’ (Heb. 1:3). There is no sense in which he somehow needs us to complete him, since he is the one who fills all things with the fullness he has received

from the Father (Eph. 1:23).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, in this age during which the Father is putting ‘all things in subjection under his feet’, in order that he might hand over ‘the kingdom to God the Father, after he has destroyed every ruler and every authority and power’ (1 Cor. 15:24–27), the people whom he is saving are at the forefront of his action. He is ‘head over all things *for the church*’ (Eph. 1:22). And, in the end when he comes, he is ‘to be glorified *in his saints*, and to be marvelled at *in all who have believed*’ (2 Thess. 1:10). Never apart from us.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *What does it mean for us to be in this way the focus of attention for this one who fills all things?*
- *What does it mean for those to whom we bring the gospel?*
- *How are we to esteem them accordingly?*

## **PAUL ON THE GOSPEL, THE GENTILES AND THE JEWS**

Paul had no doubt that the gospel he brought made previously unacceptable people acceptable to God:

Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God. And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God (1 Cor. 6:9–11).

At the beginning of his letter to the Romans, Paul starts off with a very low estimate of the worth and moral probity of the Gentiles who have forsaken God:

They were filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, covetousness, malice. Full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, craftiness, they are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, haughty, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious toward parents, foolish, faithless, heartless, ruthless. They know God’s decree, that those who practice such things deserve to die—yet they not only do them but even applaud others who practice them (Rom. 1:29–32).

Yet by the end of the letter he is able to speak of:

the grace given me by God to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service of the gospel of God, so that the offering of [meaning *that is*] the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 15:15–16).

Such is the power of his gospel.

Accordingly, Paul highly esteemed even those among the Gentiles who were scornfully opposed to him. To the very ones who said, for example, ‘His letters are weighty and strong, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible’ (2 Cor. 10:10), Paul said: ‘our heart is wide open to you. There is no restriction in our affections’ (2 Cor. 6:11–13). Even: ‘you are in our hearts, to die together and to live together’ (2 Cor. 7:3). Like his master, Paul refused to dissociate himself from those to whom he was sent with the message of salvation. Rather, he was bound to them in love:

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<sup>3</sup> See Martin Bleby, ‘Baptism as Incorporation into the Body of Christ’, in *Baptised into Christ Jesus*, Ministry School 2009, NCPI, Blackwood, 2009, pp. 6.5–6.6.

we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us . . . As you know, we dealt with each one of you like a father with his children, urging and encouraging you and pleading that you lead a life worthy of God, who calls you into his own kingdom and glory . . . As for us, brothers and sisters, when, for a short time, we were made orphans by being separated from you—in person, not in heart—we longed with great eagerness to see you face to face. For we wanted to come to you—certainly I, Paul, wanted to again and again—but Satan blocked our way. For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you? Yes, you are our glory and joy! (1 Thess. 2:7–8, 11–12, 17–20).

Therefore, my brothers and sisters, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord in this way, my beloved (Phil. 4:1).

For Paul, the reality that the people to whom he had been sent were included by God was part and parcel of the gospel he proclaimed. In Ephesians 3, Paul is speaking about the ministry he has been given:

This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of you Gentiles—for surely you have already heard of the commission of God’s grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation, as I wrote above in a few words, a reading of which will enable you to perceive my understanding of the mystery of Christ (Eph. 3:1–4).

What is this ‘mystery of Christ’? Is it that ‘Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that he appeared . . .’ (1 Cor. 15:3–5), as Paul says elsewhere? He has already made reference to that in this letter. At this point he is concerned with something else, that Paul says is new on the scene:

In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, *the Gentiles have become fellow heirs*, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel (Eph. 3:5–6).

This ‘mystery of Christ’ is the inclusion of the Gentile nations now among the people of God. Though Paul says this ‘was not made known’ before, he traces elsewhere that this was the intention of God right back as early as Abraham, if not before (Gal. 3:6–9, 14; Eph. 1:4), and had always been part of God’s witness to Israel (Rom. 15:8–13). What he means here is that this inclusion was not operative before this time—it was in fact excluded by the law of Moses (see Eph. 2:11–12, 15)—but that now it has become operative, since Christ in the great cleansing action of the cross took up into himself both Israel and the Gentile nations (see Eph. 2:13–22). Paul now finds himself at the spearhead of this new movement of inclusion, and is constrained to proclaim it as part of his gospel:

Of this gospel I have become a servant according to the gift of God’s grace that was given me by the working of his power. Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given to me to bring to the Gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ, and to make everyone see what is the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things; so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the eternal purpose that he has carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord, in whom we have access to God in boldness and confidence through faith in him (Eph. 3:7–12).

In this, Paul’s witness was no less to his own people the Jews, since Christ had sent him to both:

I will rescue you from your people and from the Gentiles—to whom I am sending you to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in me (Acts 26:17–18).

Paul's consistent practice, even in Gentile areas, was to go first to the Jewish synagogue or place of prayer, and only after that—usually when he was ejected—to the Gentiles (see e.g. Acts 13:14–16, 44–49; 14:1–2; 16:11–13; 17:1–15; Rom. 1:16). Even when warned of 'imprisonment and persecution', despite attempts of his closest associates to dissuade him, Paul was intent on going to Jerusalem 'to bring alms to my nation and to offer sacrifices' (see Acts 20:22–24; 21:4, 10–14; 24:17). So his commitment to and love for the Israelites to whom he brought the gospel was no less than that which he had towards the Gentiles:

I am speaking the truth in Christ—I am not lying; my conscience confirms it by the Holy Spirit—I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my own people, my kindred according to the flesh. They are Israelites . . . my heart's desire and prayer to God for them is that they may be saved (Rom. 9:1–4; 10:1).

So Paul looked forward to the time when 'the full number of the Gentiles has come in. And so all Israel will be saved' (Rom. 11:25–26). Whether 'all Israel' here means the nation of Israel, or the whole people of God including both Jews and Gentiles,<sup>4</sup> Paul's concern here is for both equally.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

- *To what extent are the people to whom the gospel comes a part of the gospel itself?*
- *What might be the implications of this for how we regard those to whom we bring the gospel?*

## **ABRAHAM WAITS FOR US**

Hebrews 11 is a cavalcade of the people of faith through the ages, from creation through to the end of the Old Testament. Prominent in the procession is Abraham, with his wife Sarah. They were looking to an inheritance that was the heavenly reality, belonging to the time of resurrection, far more than just the physical land of Israel: 'he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God' (see Heb. 11:8–19). We might think that Abraham, Sarah, and all the other people of faith are now enjoying this reward, having entered into it when they died. The writer tells us differently:

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect (Heb. 11:39–40).

Abraham and the others are waiting for us to join them before they themselves can be complete—presumably not just in number, but in joy and fulfilment as well! What does that tell us about their relationship with us, and ours with them? What are the implications of this for how we are to consider those who are yet to come after us? Certainly these who have gone before us in faith bear witness to us of what they have seen and known of Christ, and no doubt urge us to participate in this with them to the end:

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<sup>4</sup> See Morris, *Romans*, p. 421.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God (Heb. 12:1–2).

Do we not have no less a function towards those to whom we witness of these same things? And is there not a sense that we too will be incomplete without them?

In a present and very practical sense, we are now in a redeemed community of faith in which we are to ‘wait for one another’, with none racing ahead, or any falling behind—a body in which no part is to go before others in priority—that we all might arrive at the one place together:

So then, my brothers and sisters, when you come together to eat, wait for one another (1 Cor. 11:33).

### **Question for Discussion:**

- *We say in the Apostles’ Creed: ‘I believe in . . . the communion of saints’. What are the implications of this for how we go about evangelising?*

## **THE GLORY OF GOD**

The gospel, then, will be complete when we see ‘the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’, where ‘the home of God is among [human beings]. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them’ (Rev. 21:2, 3). ‘Nothing accursed will be found there any more’, and ‘nothing unclean will enter it’ (Rev. 22:3; 21:27), but ‘The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their glory into it . . . People will bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations’ (Rev 21:24, 26)—all cleansed and purified, shining with ‘the glory of God and a radiance like a very rare jewel, like jasper, clear as crystal’ (Rev. 21:11).

Thus the glory of God will be manifested in the vast and fascinating array of what God has done in the lives of people through all the ages in bringing them to Himself by His action and gospel of grace. To know ourselves as a part of that, along with those who have gone before, and those whom we will bring with us among those who come after, is a powerful incentive to see the full number of God’s elect brought to completion and perfection. Sensing the glory that we will see and be a part of there, are we not eager now to search out and see the glory that is being wrought by God in the lives of persons around us, to whom we come, aware of it or not, as messengers of the good news of God?

### **Question for Discussion:**

- *How does the promise and the reality of the holy city affect our present relationships with those around us?*