

April 26, 2009

# THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL

## *Rehearsing the Good of the Gospel – 3*

Ephesians 2:19 – 22

The gospel is the power of God unto salvation, Romans 1 tells us. This is not only the initial salvation experience from the penalty of sin – what we would call being born from above. But it is our daily salvation from the power of sin in our lives, from the daily temptations of the world, the flesh and the devil, and is ultimately, the means to the redemption of our bodies in the day that our Lord returns. The gospel, in all its fulness, is **our daily need, our daily protection, our daily sufficiency, our daily motivation toward holiness, and our daily stimulation to good works.** And this is what Paul is calling the saints to rehearse – to remember – to keep calling to mind. Essentially what Paul thinks is important for us as Christians to remember and rehearse is our **wretched condition without Christ and the joy and delight and freedom we enjoy now in Christ.**

And we have for the past few weeks, been rehearsing the good of the gospel as we remembered our wretched condition before Christ: **separated, alienated, estranged, having no hope and without God** in the world. And also rehearsing the grace of God in salvation: **brought near by the blood of Christ, at peace with one another, born into a whole new race of people, reconciled to God, and given free access to the Father through the sacrifice of His Son.** These are tremendous truths that need to penetrate our hearts and minds; and that is why we need to rehearse them.

We need to rehearse these things because the enemy of our souls is always at work trying to steal our joy by lying to us and clouding the issue when we sin. One of Satan's titles is the Accuser of the Brethren – and he takes his job seriously. How many times have you been discouraged from praying or coming to church or reading your Bible because he was there, whispering in your ear, pointing out just what a poor excuse for a Christian you really are? How many times have you retreated from being a bold witness for Christ because you were listening to a litany of your sins from the accuser? Rehearsing the good of the gospel is one of the best ways to resist the enemy and make him flee.

When that happens to me I turn to the gospel: *And I heard a loud voice in heaven, saying, Now the salvation and the power and the kingdom of our God and the authority of his Christ have come, for the **accuser of our brothers has been thrown down, who accuses them day and night before our God. And they have overcome him by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, for they loved not their lives even unto death.*** Revelation 12:10-11 It is significant that the word rendered 'testimony' here has the meaning of strong, factual evidence – like you would need in a court of law. **The way to make the enemy flee is bring up the evidence** – you were once like that but now by the blood of Christ have been brought near to God. You were once hostile to God but have now been reconciled to Him. You were at war with everyone, and now you have peace. And furthermore, you have access to the throne room of God and he doesn't – he has been thrown down.

We also need to rehearse and preach the good of the gospel to ourselves because we are so prone to let the power and strength of those truths slip away. It is like what D.L Moody told a woman who asked why we need to pray over and over to be filled with the Holy Spirit like Paul tells us later on in Ephesians. **'It's because we leak'** he said. And we do. If we do not constantly refresh our hearts and minds with the gospel goodness, the power and strength of those truths to impact our souls leaks away.

Now in verse 19, Paul turns from the gospel truths about us individually to the gospel truth about us corporately: *So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God,* Ephesians 2:19 When God saved us He made us **fellow citizens with the saints** – that speaks of a corporate identity, not just individual. That implies that we have a common destiny, a common welfare, a common hope and a common goal with all Christians everywhere. Furthermore, Paul tells us in Philippians that *'...our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ'* Philippians 3:20 When we trust in Christ our citizenship is changed from earthly to heavenly, with all the rights, privileges and responsibilities that go with citizenship. And I think that has great implications for us.

**Our rehearsing of the gospel truth that we are fellow citizens of heaven with the saints will impact the way we live here on earth.** *"If you read history you will find that the Christians who did the most for the present world were precisely those who thought most of the next."* C.S. Lewis And I think that is the point of rehearsing the gospel truth that we are now citizens of heaven with the saints. I don't believe the point Paul was making was that earth was some sort of prison we have to endure on our way to heaven – and if we can just hang on, one day we'll make it.

I believe Paul was drawing a parallel between the concept of his Roman citizenship and his heavenly citizenship. First of all the point about citizenship concerns **who you are and where your loyalties lie, not about where you live.** Citizens of Rome were not all living in Rome – they were all over the Empire, living like Romans. Roman citizenship did not mean that Rome was the place you **really** belonged, and you were just marking time in this backwater province until you could move there. Citizenship had rather to do with what you sought to make a reality where you **already were.** Just as Roman citizens spread the culture of Rome all over the world – as citizens of heaven we need to be doing that on earth. We were created for the earth – we are citizens of heaven. Our status is earthbound heavenly citizens – our allegiance is to our King in Heaven. These are not contradictory statements. **It is because we are citizens of heaven that our lives can be salt and light here on earth.** As citizens of a heavenly kingdom we ought to be spreading the influence of heaven on earth right where we live.

**Rehearsing this truth will create a boldness in our gospel witness.** Martin Luther once said: *'If we consider the greatness and the glory of the life we shall have when we have risen from the dead, it would not be difficult at all for us to bear the concerns of this world. If I believe the Word, I shall on the Last Day, after the sentence has been pronounced, not only gladly have suffered ordinary temptations, insults, and imprisonment, but I shall also say: "O, that I did not throw myself under the feet of all the godless for the sake of the great glory which I now see revealed and which has come to me through the merit of Christ!"'* Martin Luther

**Rehearsing this truth will produce a deeper desire for holiness in our lives.** *'And everyone who thus hopes in Him purifies himself as He is pure.'* 1 John 3:3 If you **are** a citizen of heaven you are actively engaged in striving to live **as** a citizen of heaven – running from sin and embracing holiness. Choosing to obey rather than choosing your own way.

**Rehearsing this gospel generated heavenward focus will also serve to steel your heart against discouragement and despair when trouble comes.** As you rehearse and contemplate the weight of the glories to come, your trials and troubles will seem light in comparison. When you ponder the staggering implications of an eternity where all your desires are legitimate, all your motives pure, all your longings satisfied, the daily battles against the world, the flesh and the devil will not seem hopeless or endless. *So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.* 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

He also made us **members of His household** which means we are not hired servants trying to earn His good favor, but sons and daughters of God with all the special connections and favor that implies. As family members, we belong to each other. The success or failure of each one of us becomes important. **Rehearsing this truth will cause us to care for the welfare of each other.** It matters to me that you do well and it matters to you that I do well. Our lives are impacted in profound ways by each other. If we understood this reality – really embraced this gospel truth – we would not see the kind of church-hopping behavior that exists today – people leaving one church for another one when they felt like it. If we truly understood that we are members together of God's household, we would not treat each other like enemies. We would not see the bitter church fights that result in agonizing and tragic church splits. If we got hold of the truth that we are members of His household – things would change between us.

Taken together, fellow citizens and members of the household of God imply that each believer is a significant player in each other's gospel story and it is in our relationship with one another that we experience the fullness of God in Christ. **So the more we rehearse these truths, the more we value and cherish the church for which Christ died.** Milton Vincent writes in his book *A Gospel Primer: 'The more I experience the gospel, the more there develops within me a yearning affections for my fellow Christians who are also participating in the glories of the gospel.'* We love one another not only **because of the gospel,** but we love them best when we are loving them **with the gospel.**

We are not only fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, but Paul finishes this section by painting two more portraits of our corporate identity: **a holy temple and a dwelling place of God**. He says that we, as a church corporately are *built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone*, Ephesians 2:20

**Every building has a foundation and ours is the apostles and prophets.** Here Paul is not referring to the Old Testament prophets, first because if he had intended that then being a good Jew, the prophets would have come first. But more compelling evidence comes a couple of sentences later in chapter 3 as he talks about the mystery of the gospel: *which was not made known to the sons of men in other generations as it has now been revealed to His holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit*. Ephesians 3:5 Although the Old Testament prophets had hinted at the mystery to come – they did not have the full picture – only types and shadows. But here Paul definitely excludes the Old Testament prophets by saying the full picture has **now** been revealed – to the apostles and prophets of **now** – not then.

The other thing to consider is that Paul was probably referring to one group of people and not two when he says, the apostles and prophets. Because they share one definite article, the apostles and prophets, there is good reason to think that Paul was thinking something like – **the apostles who prophesy** or **the apostles who also function as prophets**. I believe this to be the case because of the nature of apostles and prophets and two critical Scriptures. The first is in Matthew chapter 16, and the second is in the book of the Revelation chapter 21.

In Matthew 16, Jesus asks the question of His disciples: Who do men say that I am? *Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And Jesus answered him, Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.* Matthew 16:16-18 Peter had a revelation from the Father – and on this rock, this revelation, the Lord says that He will build His church. Apostles speak forth the revealed word of the Lord, and prophets mainly speak the word of the Lord revealed to them. Peter got a direct revelation from God – and this the Lord said was the foundation on which He would build His church. **And it was this revelation that the apostles preached all over the world.**

The other reference is in the Book of the Revelation chapter 21 verse 14. Here the apostle John was describing the holy city, New Jerusalem and he says: *And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb*. Revelation 21:14 What you don't see are the names of twelve prophets – only twelve apostles. So the implication here is that the church is built on the foundation of the apostle-prophets that had the revelation of the whole New Testament delivered to them and any other foundation is suspect. Paul tells the Corinthians: *According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.* 1 Corinthians 3:10. **The point is that our foundation is biblical revelation through these apostles as recorded in Scripture, with nothing modified, added or removed.** It is as Jude writes the *faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints*.

Our foundation is the apostles and prophets, but the plumb line from which everything depends is **Christ Jesus, the cornerstone**. *'...Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone'* Ephesians 2:20 This is a reference from Isaiah 28:6: *'...therefore thus says the Lord God, Behold, I am the one who has laid as a foundation in Zion, a stone, a tested stone, a precious cornerstone, of a sure foundation: Whoever believes will not be disappointed.'* Isaiah 28:6 The cornerstone was almost like a blue-print stone that was the determining factor in the shape, size, dimensions and ratios of the structure which it supported. It was the most expensive and most valuable stone in the whole house, temple or other building. It was crafted specifically for these purposes. That is Christ – everything relates to Him – everything gains its significance from Him – all our work and worship is should flow out of our relationship to the cornerstone. **Jesus is the content of Christian life and character.** The words and life of Jesus determine the contours of this faith, the parameters of our life together, the substance of what we believe and who, by his grace, we hope to become.

This foundation and cornerstone then are the undergirding for what Paul calls the holy temple and a dwelling place of God. He says that we are **growing** into a holy temple – and that we are **being built** in to a dwelling place of God: *'...in Whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In Him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.'* Ephesians 2:21-22 On the one hand we are growing into something – and on the other hand we are being built into something. We are growing into a holy temple – we are being built into a dwelling place of God. **Growing implies rising levels of maturity – building implies that we are being worked on.** And both ought to be true of Christians.

If we are not growing, there ought to be a question as to whether or not we are really Christians. One of the saddest things to see is a someone who calls themselves a Christian, yet never grows in the faith. **The life of Christ is dynamic and growth in the faith outwardly is the best evidence of eternal life inwardly.** And our relationship to the corporate body of Christians is crucial to the progress of the growth of our personal relationship with God. I have met many who claim to be Christians and yet never attend church and are not involved with a community of believers. When those people tell me that they are Christians – I tend to challenge that statement. The life of Christ within will not permit us to go our own way. Christianity is not a faith of rugged individualists but rather a faith of corporate individuals – growing into a holy temple.

And this temple is being built into a dwelling place of God. That is a profound thought. God lives here! In the Book of the Revelation, John saw the reality of this: *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them as their God.* Revelation 21:3 What is happening here on earth is that God is building a dwelling place for Himself. And building implies that the materials are being shaped and shaved and cut and planed to fit into the building.

There is a lot in us that is not suitable for the dwelling place of God and it needs to go. C.S. Lewis describes this as '*...the shaping of the Christian with the hammer and chisel of adversity.*' A man who recently suffered some severe trials in his life, was watching the construction of a huge stone church and noticed a man chipping away at one piece of rock into a particular triangular shape. Every now and then he would look up and squint his eye as if matching the shape of the rock to something on the steeple of the church.

When the man asked the worker what he was working on, the worker replied, **'I'm shaping this stone down here so that it fits up there.'** And that is what God is doing with His church – building a dwelling place of God by the Spirit. And much of the time He uses our adversity to shape us into what He wants, because He knows that suffering and trials have the effect of reducing us to God and removing all that is not fit for God.

We need to rehearse these gospel truths so that we don't get blindsided by the enemy of our souls – so that our faith will grow and not be stunted – so that our foundation is solid and sure and doesn't wash away in the first storm that comes along. We need to speak the gospel truth to our souls that we are fellow-citizens with all the saints and members of the household of God. We need to get hold of the gospel truth that we are growing into a holy temple in the Lord and that God is at work on us to build us into a dwelling place of God by the Spirit. We need to let the gospel wash over us every day until our thinking is lined up with the word of God. This will fill your days with purpose and your hearts with joy. Rehearse the good of the gospel!

*Our gracious Father and blessed Redeemer,*

*Grant that we would remember and rehearse the good of the gospel daily. Teach us to treasure this mighty blessing and to surrender every darling lust and sinful desire to its command. May the gospel goodness impact our souls to control our affections, mold our understanding and fill us with joy. Holy Spirit, lift the mists and darkness of unbelief and illuminate our souls with the pure light of the gospel of truth. Lead us to the cross so that we might taste the bitterness of sin and the sweetness of our Savior. May we never lose sight of the exceeding wonder of Your forgiveness; the wonder of the love of Christ; and the mighty power of the gospel in our lives. Awaken those still dead in trespasses and sins to the beauty and glory of the gospel and cause them to delight in God through Jesus Christ we pray in the precious, life-giving name of Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen.*

**May the Lord bless you and keep you  
and make His face shine upon you.  
May the Lord be gracious unto you;  
May the Lord lift up His countenance on you  
and give you peace.**