

The Gospel Is News

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[0 : 00] Please turn with me back to Acts chapter 13. We're going to read again verse 32 and the first half of verse 33 where Paul said, We bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children by raising Jesus.

Now that title comes, we're doing a short series called The Good News of the Kingdom. And that title comes from a phrase that you see several times in the New Testament describing the message of Christianity in these words. It is the good news of the kingdom.

And we're doing a short series to unpack that, to help us understand more about what the gospel is all about. So we're going to look at an aspect of that phrase in turn.

A couple of weeks ago we thought about how the gospel is good. Today we're going to think about how the gospel is news. Next week we'll think about how the gospel is about the kingdom.

A couple of weeks ago you remember that we spoke about how the gospel is so good. And the reason it's so good is because it takes us to the greatest heights of joy as we discover the blessing of forgiveness, the privilege of knowing Jesus, and the amazing security of eternal life that the gospel gives us.

[1 : 18] And the whole reason that we can experience those heights of joy is because of the depths of His grace. We are sinners, our sins are red like crimson, their scarlet bit of stain on us.

But though that sin has left us in the darkest of depths, and though we're incapable of getting ourselves out of that hole, that rock bottom is exactly where the grace of God reaches us.

That's where Jesus meets us. Sin can never take you where Jesus can't reach you. And all of that is why the gospel is so, so good. Today we're in part two. We're going to think about how the gospel is news.

And we're going to look at that under three headings. Headings are our need for information, our thirst for truth, and our dependence on promises. And we're actually going to split this today. So our three-part series has become a four-part series because we're going to go do these two this morning and we're going to do that one tonight. So we're starting, with thinking about our need for information. This is true in every aspect of human experience.

We need information. So babies learn to smile and speak through interaction with their parents. Children go to school, where teachers pour their energy into imparting information to them.

[2 : 39] You start a new job, you need information in order to be able to do that effectively. You want to buy a house or a car, you need information in order to make a decision. And even if you want to meet with friends for a walk, you need information to know when and where you're going to meet. So everywhere we go, every stage of life, you need information. And at its most general level, that's what we mean when we talk about news. We're talking about information being communicated to us. And that might be the national headlines. It might be the events that are taking place in our community.

It might even be the gossip at work. All the time, information is being communicated to us. And humanity can't function without that giving and receiving of information. And that information always has to fit this purpose for which it's intended and the circumstances from which it arises. You could think of hundreds of examples. You think of Lego. You take the instructions from a box of Lego. That instructions has to match the bits that are in the box, and it has to match the things that you want to make. Same with election results. The results have to correspond to the numbers. And musical notes, what's written on the paper, has to correspond to the tune. Whatever it may be, the information has to correspond to the purpose for which it arises. It all contributes to the process whereby humanity becomes better informed.

And as that happens, that achieved and more and more purposes are fulfilled. A simple way of saying it is to say that at every single stage of life, there is stuff that you need to know.

And what we're discovering today is that the message of the Gospel is exactly the same. It contains a body of information and that information is communicated to us and it's specific to the purposes for which it's intended. In other words, the Gospel contains stuff that you need to know. The only difference is that this stuff is more important than anything else.

So what is the stuff? What is contained in the body of information that makes up this news? Well, there's loads that we could say because the whole Bible functions to communicate that information to us. Within that news, there are several key headlines that we can highlight. There's the supremacy of God, the fact that he is ultimate reality. He's the creator of the universe.

[5 : 22] He's the source from which everything else comes. There's the dignity of humanity, the fact that we've been made in his image. We are unique. We are special. We're precious. Every human of equal value. That's a key headline in the information that the Gospel contains. There's the reality of sin, the fact that the world around us and we ourselves are broken. We've fallen from where God made us to be. We've rebelled against him and a relationship with the world around us, with one another, with ourselves and with God has been ruined and on our own we can't fix it.

There's the provision of salvation. Despite our sin, God has not left us. He's not abandoned us. He's not treating us as our sins deserve. Instead, he initiates a magnificent plan of salvation foreshadowed in the Old Testament, fulfilled in the new, all centered in the person and work of Jesus. There's the call to faith and repentance. And so the Gospel doesn't communicate a list of dues and don'ts that you have to fulfill. It's a message of free grace, but we must turn to Jesus and trust in him. There's the call to faith and repentance. And there's the headline that ultimately Jesus will return. And ultimately that's where every truth will come to light.

Everything that's hidden will be revealed. All who trust in him will enter this new creation. All who reject him will be lost in hell. All of these headlines run through the Bible, but there is one big headline that stretches over it all. One piece of information that is the single most important thing that you need to know. It's the core item of information that lies at the heart of the news of the Gospel. And it's the thing that Paul focuses on in the passage that we read.

One big headline. What is it? Jesus is risen. That's the big headline of the Christian Gospel.

In this chapter, Paul is teaching and preaching about the Gospel, about the good news. And in doing so, he talks about lots of stuff in the Old Testament. He narrates some of the key events that have led up to this point, but all of it culminates in a declaration about the reality of the resurrection.

[7 : 51] I won't read it out, but you can see it there in the verses before us between 29 and 37. So when Paul is asked to preach the Gospel, he makes sure that the place he reaches is the resurrection.

And you actually see exactly the same thing. Earlier in Acts, when he speaks about the resurrection, I won't read it out, but if you go to Acts 2, 22 to 28, he does the same thing, speaks about the resurrection of Jesus, and Peter does the same thing in Acts chapter 10 as well. The Gospel message is centered on the amazing news that Jesus has risen. That's the information that the whole world needs to know. And it's so crucial that as a church, that is always our main headline. That's why we meet on Sundays. It's the first day of the week. It's the day that Jesus rose. We meet together at the start of every new week to declare and rejoice in the fact that Jesus is risen.

It's so important that this is our main headline, and it's important for two reasons. First, because you cannot actually get to the resurrection without taking in all the key events that lead up to it.

And so you see that when you look at Paul. Paul is narrating key events from the Old Testament, from the life of John the Baptist, talks about our need for salvation. He takes the people to the cross where Jesus was condemned to death, and then he leads them to the empty tomb where you have this astonishing truth that Jesus has risen and everyone who believes in him can have forgiveness of sins, as it's proclaimed there in verse 38. In other words, you can't come to the empty tomb without walking past the cross, and you can't find the cross without following all the signs that are pointing you towards it. But it all culminates in this great headline that Jesus is risen.

And under that headline lies all the details of why we desperately, desperately need an empty tomb. And the second key reason why it's so important that we keep our focus on the resurrection is because it's really easy to have an understanding of the gospel that stops short of the empty tomb.

[10:04] And you see this in lots of different ways. So some people stop at Eden, and they read about the perfection of humanity, and they stop there, and they think, there's nothing wrong with us. Everything's fine. Some people stop at the fall in Genesis chapter 3, when our relationship with God was broken, and some people conclude that humanity's just doomed.

Some people stop at the law, revealed in particular in the Ten Commandments, given to Moses after the Exodus, and we think, okay, that's the answer. There's stuff we need to do. We do this, and do that, and make sure that our good stuff outweighs our bad stuff, and then we'll be saved through our own legalistic efforts. Some stop at the ministry of Jesus and think, oh, he set us a great example. We should follow him. And if we do all of these things, whatever religion you end up with is not Christianity, because none of those are containing what the gospel is actually all about. For it to be the gospel, you have to get to the cross. But sometimes people come to the cross and stop there. And what happens then is that people do come to faith, they become believers, but they're just stuck at the cross. And what will often happen to them is that as they're there, they have a deep sense of their sin. They have a profound realization of the fact that they have done wrong, and that God has done so much for them. And there's a sincere thankfulness for the cleansing from sin that the cross brings. And at one level, that's really, really good.

And it's definitely better than all the other places where you can sometimes stop. But if you just stop at the cross and never marvel at the empty tomb, then it can result in two types of Christian. It can result in the Christian who is sad. So yes, they can't get past, really grateful for what they've done, what Jesus has done for them. But they can't get past the fact that they are a sinner, they failed, they're unworthy. And it actually leaves them sad most of the time.

Or it can result in the Christian who is shallow. So there's an appreciation that sins are forgiven, and there's a sense of security in being saved. But the majority of life is lived as though to say, yes, Jesus has fixed me, that's sorted. I know that I'll be going to heaven, and you'll live most of your life with Jesus in a corner, and without him having much influence on your life at all.

And in that kind of mindset, you can have a believer, but for whom Jesus is kind of like a problem solver that you just pick up and put down as and when he's needed. And all of this can happen if we're just stopping and stuck at the cross. So we must come to the cross. You must reach there, but you mustn't stop there, because we've got to get to the empty tomb.

[13 : 04] And those of you who will be familiar with some of the key passages of the Old Testament, it's interesting for you to notice that as Paul preaches his sermon here, one thing that's fascinating is that he doesn't take the congregation to Isaiah 53. He takes them to Sam 16. And the interesting thing about that is that Isaiah 53 is an amazing passage, one of the most amazing passages in the whole Bible, but it's all about the cross. And it's interesting that that's not where Paul went. Instead, he went to Sam 16, which is one of the most amazing Psalms, and it's all about the resurrection. That's crucial, because Paul is teaching us that in our understanding of the gospel, we've always got to get to the good news of the resurrection, because the resurrection tells you that Jesus reigns over the one thing that reigns over every single one of us.

Humanity is under the grip of death, and death wins in every human life. We see that all the time in our community, and you only have to stop and think about your own life to be confronted with that reality again. And the key point is that that is what Jesus came to fix. This is what Jesus has come to fix, and this is what his resurrection proves. And when we discover that, the fact that Jesus has won victory over death, that death does not have the last word for every single person who trusts in Jesus. When we discover that information, we cannot be sad, because there is hope, there is hope and peace and life for all who trust in Jesus, and every separation now that is agony as we lose people we love, for all who trust in Jesus, those separations are only temporary.

And we can look forward to being reunited with the people that we love, and more than anything, enjoying the presence and wonder of being in God's presence forever. You cannot be sad, and when we discover that information, we cannot be shallow either, because if Jesus has risen, it means that he reigns. He has total authority and power. He's returning to judge the living and the dead. We've got to take that information seriously, and that needs to shape every single part of our lives. So often we will live our lives conscious of the fact that people are in charge.

So if you're driving into Stornoway and you see the speed camera out, you think, oh, I need to change the way I drive, because they're in charge. Or if you go to school, and the head teacher comes into the classroom, you think, I've got to behave, she's in charge, or whatever, you get a letter from HF, I don't know, if you're getting asked to fill in your tax return or whatever, you get a letter from HMRC, you think, oh, I better get this right, they're in charge. The person who is in charge of everything, everything is Jesus.

And we have to live our lives in the light of that truth. If the tomb isn't empty, then the consequences of what you do with this news are irrelevant. But if the tomb is empty, if Jesus is risen, then the consequences of what you do with this news are inescapable.

[16 : 35] Nothing, nothing is more important than this information. Jesus is risen, he's calling all of us to trust in him. But alongside that need for information, we also have a thirst for truth. And these two are actually connected, because wrong information is unhelpful and dangerous, information has to be accurate, we thirst for the truth. And the more important the issue is, the greater that thirst becomes. So if someone's telling you a funny story, we don't tend to mind if the details aren't correct, because we just want the story to be funny.

But if you're at the doctor, if you're in a courtroom, if you're checking your bank balance, you want every piece of information to be completely accurate. And in all the important areas of life, we all thirst for truth. In fact, in any area of life, your thirst for truth is going to tell you how much about that particular issue. So I don't know, people are very different.

I'm one of these people who care about my car. So if I went, as long as my car starts in the morning, I do not care about my car. So if I went to town, and I left my car, and I came back, and someone had scratched it, I can honestly say I wouldn't care. It's just not cars or just, they're just a tool to do. If you start my bike, I would be a little more concerned. But car not bothered. Other people, though, very bothered. And so it's just, you would be really keen to know the truth about what happened. Another good example is a lot of people, and some of you are included, have to live with food intolerances or food allergies. And if you have a food allergy or food intolerance, you need to know the ingredients in something that you're buying or in a dish that's been served. You need to know what's in it. Because you care a lot about whether or not you're going to consume something that you know your body is not going to react well to. If you don't have an intolerance, you don't care. You're just like, well, does it taste nice? You're not interested, you don't really think too much about what the ingredients are. Same with the weather.

We look at the weather forecast, and it's like, oh, it's rubbish again, and we just roll our eyes. But if you're a fisherman or a farmer, the forecast has to be accurate, because if it's a bad forecast and you're like, well, I won't go out, and then it turns out to be good, you might have lost thousands of pounds because of the inaccuracy in that information. And so your thirst for truth will tell you how much you care about a particular issue. How much you care will tell you how seriously you take that information. So let me ask a question. Today, do people thirst for truth about God, about faith, about eternity? Do you? And I ask that question because today less and less people have that thirst. And the reason people don't have that thirst for truth in terms of their religion is because we no longer see it as very important.

And that is such a crucial issue. If you don't thirst for truth about eternity, it's because you don't really care about eternity.

[20 : 20] And are you sure that that's wise? In most people's minds today, my life story is massive. Eternity is tiny if it's even there at all. That is probably the biggest mathematical and spiritual error that anyone can ever make.

So we thirst for truth, but how do we find it? And when we do, how do we know it's the truth? And that's a huge question and it's pointing us to the whole question of the authority of the Bible. And this is something a lot of people wrestle with. It's like, well, okay, you're saying the Bible is the word of God. How do I know? How do we know that that's true?

The Christian faith is grounded on a message of good news. That good news is contained in the Bible. It centers on the resurrection of Jesus and the whole of Christianity stands or falls on whether or not this is true. Paul talks about that. He says, if Christ has not been raised, if the resurrection is not true, or preaching is in vain, your faith is in vain, the whole of Christianity falls to pieces. So how do we know it's true? And how can we be sure that this message is going to quench our thirst for truth? Well, again, there's loads we could say, running out of time as always. But there's two things I want to highlight that are crucial for verifying the claims of Christianity. The first is the testimony of eyewitnesses. And Paul speaks about that in this passage. He talks about people who saw the risen Jesus. And this is crucial.

And you see this again and again in the New Testament, the early Christians did not claim to be spiritual gurus. They didn't claim to be the revealers of religious secrets. And they did not try to be the leaders of a new movement that other people would follow. In other words, they weren't trying to be influencers. They just told people what they had seen. They'd seen Jesus die. They'd seen Him placed in the tomb. They knew He was dead. And after His resurrection, they saw Him alive. And that's the starting point for this message. They were eyewitnesses to the resurrection.

That's where they started from. And bit by bit, they understood more and more of how that resurrection was everything that the Scriptures had been pointing towards. The truth of the Christian gospel is grounded on eyewitness testimony. But that's not the only testimony to the truth of God's message. Alongside the testimony of eyewitnesses, we also speak about the testimony of the Holy Spirit in our hearts. Now, the New Testament speaks about that in other places. An example is John 16. When the Spirit of Truth comes, He'll guide you into all truth, for He will not speak in His own authority, but whatever He hears, He will speak and He'll declare to you the things that are to come. Romans 8.16, the Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God. Now, what that's describing is the fact that we believe that God the Holy Spirit bears witness to our hearts, says to us, to confirm the truth of this message to us. It's captured very well in the Westminster Confession of Faith. I'm going to just put a paragraph of the Westminster Confession of Faith. The Westminster Confession of Faith, it's written nearly 400 years ago. It's a summary of what we believe, a summary of the key truths in the Bible. Chapter one is all about Scripture. And here, in this paragraph, I'll read it all.

[23 : 52] The first part is talking all about the stuff in the Bible that evidences itself to be the word of God. But the bit of bold in the bottom is the testimony of the Spirit that I'm talking about here. So let me just read it all. We may be moved and induced by the testimony of the church to a high and reverent esteem of the Holy Scripture and the heaviness of the matter, the efficacy of the doctrine, the majesty of the style, the consent of all the parts, the scope of the whole, which is to give glory to God. The full discovery of it makes of it, the full discovery it makes of the only way of man's salvation and the many other incompatible excellencies and the entire perfection thereof are arguments whereby it does abundantly evidence itself to be the word of God. So in summary, that's saying there's loads of cool stuff in the Bible that is evidence that it's the word of God, yet notwithstanding this is the most important part. Our full persuasion and assurance of the infallible truth and divine authority of the Bible is from the inward work of the Holy Spirit bearing witness by and with the word in our hearts. That is saying our full persuasion comes from the

Holy Spirit working in our hearts, assuring us that this is true. Now you might be thinking, okay Thomas, that sounds a bit convenient and a bit subjective because surely anybody can say, well I know in my heart this is true, even when it clearly isn't. And that does happen, it's to be expected because our hearts on their own are not a reliable source of information and so you will have lots of people saying, well I'm sure in my heart that this is right, even when it's clearly wrong. And so this passage is not saying your heart is always right, it's never wrong. What it is saying is that as you read God's truth in his word, you are only going to be persuaded that that is true by the work of God's Spirit in your heart. So when you read the Bible, you're ultimately only going to be persuaded by it if God the Holy Spirit is speaking to your heart. And you see that in Acts 13 because Paul gives a warning at the end and he's saying, look, you can hear all this, people will hear this and yet they don't believe. And that's what can happen with some people, they'll read it but they won't actually accept it. And all of this is teaching us that as we read

God's word with our eyes, as we hear it with our ears, we're still totally dependent on God to open our hearts to see that this is the truth. And that means that the authority of the scriptures and the Bible's right to be the rule that shapes our lives comes ultimately from God himself. And that's so important. We're not saying believe the Bible because the free church says you should.

And we're not saying believe the Bible because the Westminster Confession says it should. We're not saying believe the Bible because anybody says it should, the authority comes from God himself. He is the one who persuades our hearts that this is true. Now, I hope that I'm going to be able to show you that all of this is actually amazing because it's teaching us that discovering the truth about God cannot happen from a distance. It can only happen through God himself speaking directly to your heart. In other words, you don't discover the truth by reading about God.

You discover the truth by meeting God. That's what the gospel is about, a personal encounter between you and the living and through God. In the gospel, you don't just learn the truth, you experience it. And it all fits together so beautifully. And when we take these two testimonies together, the external eye witness recorded in scripture and the inward witness of the Holy Spirit, you get a combination that quenches your thirst for truth because you get a personal encounter around your room that's grounded on public claims. And that's the key thing I want to highlight, the personal and public nature of all of this. That combination is so, so important. On its own, a personal encounter can be completely subjective. So it's like, oh, I believe this, somebody said this, I'm sure it's right, it's all in my heart. And people use that excuse to believe all sorts of nonsense. On its own, a personal encounter can mean whatever you want it to mean, but the gospel is not that. The gospel is a personal encounter locked to public claims. And so the internal testimony of the Spirit is telling us that the Bible is true. And it's, and the claim of the

[28 : 48] Bible that Jesus is amazing, individual people read the eyewitnesses to back it up. And the result is amazing, individual people read the claims of the gospel, the Holy Spirit bears witness to them.

That's why somebody can read the Bible and it'll speak to them like no other book does. It's all so deeply personal. It happens in your heart. It happens to different people in different ways. So for some people, it's sudden, for some people, it's very gradual. There's all sorts of different ways that it can happen. But there's this hugely personal encounter with the Holy Spirit. And then when that happens, you are called into a church and you meet dozens and dozens of people who say exactly the same thing happened to me. I believe what you believe. I've experienced what you've experienced. And that's why the deeply personal intimate testimony, the Holy Spirit doesn't result in a million different truth claims. It results in everyone gathering together, proclaiming the glorious truth that Jesus is risen. In other words, to put it all another way, God isn't saying in the gospel, just follow the crowd, believe what everyone else is believing.

And not is God saying, just follow your heart, believe whatever you think is true. God is saying, Jesus is risen. This is a publicly verifiable fact. And then he says, by my spirit, I will meet you in the very core of your heart to open your eyes so that you can see and know that this is true. And this is where theologians will sometimes say that the gospel is intellectually credible and existentially powerful. And what that means is that it is a coherent, robust, eyewitness based proclamation of the truth that satisfies your mind.

And it is an incredibly powerful message that touches your heart and transforms your life. And the result of all this is not that in our thirst for truth, we can say that we know everything.

But the result is that in the gospel, we find the truth that quenches that thirst. And that's why a Christian will never say to you, I have found every answer.

[31 : 12] But what the Christian can say is, I've stopped searching. And that is one of the things that makes following Jesus so, so wonderful. The search stops.

And we can rest in the truth of everything that he's done for us. And I hope all of us can rest in that truth today, either for the first time or yet again after following him as we go on together.

Let's pray.