

CHAPTER XII

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO PAUL

That Which is of First Importance

Within the context of Paul's gospel there are diverse opinions and practices as represented by the many churches that look to him for their spiritual guidance. Behind all the differences there is a certain unity within which most of the disciplines have built their basic theologies. This serves as a common ground of the gospel, and it is this common ground that we will examine and define here. Its event structure was most succinctly stated by Paul in I Corinthians 15, where we find his gospel summarized under five different headings that he presented "as of first importance."

- 1) Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures.
- 2) He was buried and raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.
- 3) He now reigns from the right hand of God, and will reign until all his enemies have been destroyed.
- 4) Then comes the resurrection when he will return to the earth and raise the souls who sleep. Those who are in Christ will be raised with imperishable bodies, and all will be judged.
- 5) Then comes the end. He will deliver the kingdom of God to the Father after destroying every rule, authority, and power.

We will briefly examine each of these events as needed to understand how Paul incorporated each event into his gospel. First, however, we will seek out the essence of the word "gospel" and provide a concise definition, also derived from Paul's understanding of the term. The word literally means "good message" or "glad tidings" in its New Testament Greek original. By transliteration into English, it becomes "evangelist" or "bearer of good tidings." Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon summarizes the Christian Gospel (more or less derived from Paul) as follows: "It comprises the preaching of Jesus Christ as having suffered death on the cross to procure eternal salvation for men in the kingdom of God, but as restored to life and exalted to the right hand of God in heaven, thence to return in majesty to consummate the kingdom of God; so that it may be more briefly defined as the glad tidings of salvation through Christ; the proclamation of the grace of God manifested and pledged in Christ; the gospel."

With this as basic, let us now return to the five-member event structure. Before focussing upon each one, we should note that the five events encompass past, present, and future. The first two are from the past, the third is present, while the fourth and fifth belong to the future and to the substance of prophecy.

1) Christ Died for Our Sins According to the Scripture.

This refers directly to his crucifixion, and leads one who hears it for the first time to ask certain

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questions: How is it that he died for our sins? Why did he die for our sins? Why must any one die for sin, his own or other's? What is sin, anyway? If we acknowledge Paul's claim to be an "Hebrew of the Hebrews" and a "Pharisee of the Pharisees", (which many doubt), we can reasonably assume that he resolved these questions by reference to the Law, the Psalms, and the Prophets. This tends to be confirmed by his immediate qualification, "according to the scriptures." Keeping in mind that Paul's scripture was the Septuagint, the Greek translation from the Hebrew, we can reasonably suppose that he meant to be proclaiming concord between his gospel and the scriptures, and that he defined "sin" as a scriptural concept.

Now, in I John 3:4, we read that "sin is the transgression of the law." This seems to have been Paul's definition also, and is fully illustrated by the notorious passage in Romans 7, where he deals specifically with the single illustrative law, "Thou shalt not covet." This is the tenth of the Ten Commandments, the one that Paul found impossible to obey. It was impossible for him and therefore for all men. He struggled mightily against the power of covetousness, but was helpless against it, and, in the power of the conviction of his sin, he could only cry out helplessly,

Wretched man that I am, who will deliver me from this body of death (Romans 7:24)?

But the law also informed him that

The wages of sin is death (Romans 6:23).

He interpreted this to mean that he, Paul the sinner, was therefore spiritually dead, dead to God in heaven, and therefore his body, the body of his habitation, was a body of death. He had been a proud man, thinking of himself to that certain point as a morally strong individual but when the truth of his own sinfulness came crashing in upon him, he could only conclude that he was no exception. His must be an experience common to all men; therefore,

All have sinned and fallen short of the Glory of God (Romans 3:23).

Then from his experience with the risen Christ he immediately expressed the resolution of his problem, indeed, for him the resolution of the same problem for all men,

Thanks be to God who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ (I Corinthians 15:57, Romans 7:25)!

So, strive as he might, he could not keep the Law perfectly (elsewhere he contradicts this, Philippians 3:6), therefore he was dead in sin through transgression of the Law. Then, from interpretation of the Septuagint, the "scriptures", he understood that God had set forth a specific way to save men from sin and secure their forgiveness. This consisted of the sacrifice system centered in the temple worship, according to which, and "according to the scriptures" the blood of bulls and goats could atone for or wash away sin (Hebrews 10:4). Paul had found these things futile in that they did not cleanse his conscience or give him a sense of forgiveness and he concluded,

By the works of the law shall no flesh be justified (Romans 3:20) .

He then reinterpreted this aspect of the scriptures to be only a

. . . shadow of what is to come, but the substance belongs to Christ (Colossians 2:17).

Thus, the scriptures are still valid, only they are the "shadow" only. Furthermore, to his great joy, he was also able to find this substance in the scriptures, so that everything continued to be "according to the scriptures." By recourse to the suffering servant passages of Isaiah, most pointedly Chapter 53, he understood that Jesus Christ had become the Lamb of God who sacrificed himself and atoned for our sins through crucifixion. The Prophet pointedly expressed it as follows:

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Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that made us whole, and with his stripes we are healed. All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all (Isaiah 53:4-6).

Christ Jesus became our sacrifice; by spilling his blood as the Lamb of God, he has atoned for and expiated our sins.

So, summarizing our original question, What is sin? It is the transgression of the law. Why did Christ die for our sins? Because we were helpless, and without shedding of blood there is no remission of sin. How did he die for our sins? By becoming the Lamb of God, a human sacrifice laying his life down at Calvary in our behalf, the just for the unjust, to bring us to God. And, wonder of wonders, it was all “according to the scriptures.” Therefore we have Event No. 1 in our event structure above, that which is of first importance,

Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.

2) The Burial and Resurrection

For Paul, the burial was incorporated only because one must be buried to be resurrected, and it is that resurrection that forms, after the death, the central element in Paul's gospel. People simply do not rise from the dead, yet he was convinced by his vision on the Damascus Road that he had confronted Jesus raised from the dead, and this quickly persuaded him that Jesus Christ lives. This was certainly a miracle, and could only have been accomplished by God. Therefore Paul concluded that Jesus was

designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord . . . (Romans 1:4).

So central was the event of the resurrection that Paul could say to the Corinthians,

. . . if Christ has not been raised, our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain (I Corinthians 15:14).

Then he proceeded immediately to hammer down this conviction with the further statement,

If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins (I Corinthians 15:17).

Recalling the appearance of Jesus to him on the Damascus Road, Paul interpreted this to be an appearance of like nature as the appearances to the apostles and other disciples, and the last of the appearances.

Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me (I Corinthians 15:8).

That the resurrection came on the third day, “in accordance with the scriptures” can only confirm our conviction that Paul was thoroughly familiar with the Jesus Tradition. It was Jesus who said to the Jews,

An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (Matthew 12:39,40).

I have found only one other passage of Old Testament scripture that could possibly refer to

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Jesus' third day resurrection, other than this one by Jesus. This is Hosea 6:1,2:

Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us; he has stricken, and he will bind us up. After two days he will revive us; on the third day he will raise us up, that we may live before him.

Jesus was certainly familiar with the context of this passage, for it contains the "I desire not sacrifice" quotation that he twice used in Matthew. Yet it is difficult to see how this works into Jesus' resurrection, while it is clear that Jesus took Jonah as an allegory pointing to himself. As God had commissioned Jonah to preach repentance to Nineveh, so also He had commissioned Jesus to preach repentance to Israel, which sets the stage for a comparison of Jonah's three days in the belly of the whale with Jesus' resurrection on the third day. This idea would have appealed to Paul, and so he found the resurrection of Jesus to be "on the third day, in accordance with the scriptures."

The resurrection of Jesus was the supreme event in Paul's gospel. His vision of the risen Christ is what convinced him of the resurrection of Jesus, and he concluded that this was proof of the power of the Christ to raise his followers from the dead. Christ was only the first fruits; his followers are to follow him in a second, general resurrection of those who have died in Christ. Paul compared the risen Christ with Adam. Adam was the first man, the man of flesh. Christ is the new man, the man of spirit. As in Adam all die, so in Christ shall all be made alive! Adam was a man of earth, of dust; Christ is the man of heaven, of spirit (I Corinthians 15:22,45f).

3) The Present Reign of Christ

He now reigns from the right hand of God, and will reign until all his enemies have been destroyed (I Corinthians 15:24-26). This is more evidence of his acquaintance with the Jesus Tradition, for we find Jesus saying,

All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me (Matthew 28:18).

Therefore it seems strange that Paul places very little emphasis on the kingdom, whereas to Jesus, the gospel was best described as "The gospel of the kingdom." This is a phrase Paul never used in the epistles. In all his undoubted epistles he only referred to the kingdom six times: once in Romans, four times in I Corinthians and once in I Thessalonians. He makes no direct references to the coming of the kingdom, a theme that is prominent in the gospels, and three of his seven references to the kingdom are to the inheritance of the kingdom by the saints. There is no evidence of a kingdom doctrine as such, but all seven of his references are consistent with the kingdom being a present reality on the earth. While the paucity of references in his epistles show no kingdom emphasis, this may not have been true in his preaching for Luke in the Acts generally describes Paul's message in terms of the kingdom. He has him saying to the elders of the church at Ephesus,

And now, behold, I know that all you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will see my face no more (Acts 20:25).

It was also at Ephesus that he entered the synagogue and

. . . for three months spoke boldly, arguing and pleading about the kingdom of God . . . (Acts 19:8).

There also can be no doubt but that Paul believed Jesus to be the promised anointed one (Messiah, Christ) who was descended from David according to the flesh (Romans 1:3). When we see that he was also focused on "inheriting the kingdom" according to the promise of Jesus (Matthew 25:34), we draw this conclusion: Jesus was the fulfillment of the messianic prophecy

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and Paul's gospel was a gospel of the kingdom because it consisted of the good news that Jesus had been exalted to God's right hand in kingly power and glory. Many of his enemies, however, were not yet subdued and his present reign consisted primarily of his activity in subduing or destroying the enemies. Paul believed that, when the last enemy has been destroyed (death, I Corinthians 15:26), the end would follow (I Corinthians 15:24). Paul therefore believed that we are now under the rule of God in Christ, in his kingdom, and that we will "inherit the kingdom" at the judgment, precisely as Jesus had taught. As to the exact details of the victory by which Jesus overcame so as to ascend to the throne, Paul is not enlightening, at least in his epistles. He does come very close to the truth of the matter, however, when he writes to the Philippians of the humility of Jesus, and then concludes,

. . . and being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name . . . (Philippians 2:8,9).

Clearly, Paul sees the crucifixion as being an act of obedience to the Father, one of extreme humiliation that could only be rewarded with extreme exaltation. The operative word here is "obedient." Christ became obedient unto death wherefore, because of that obedience and in virtue thereof, he was exalted to the right hand of God.

The nation of the Jews had rejected Jesus. Had they accepted him as their messiah-king, I speculate that Jerusalem and Judaism would have played a central role in the manifestation of the kingdom. Their failure resulted in two things in Paul's view: their nation was to be destroyed (which it was in AD 70) and it was necessary to reinterpret the kingdom. Since the promise was not fulfilled in a worldly sense, with Jesus ruling from the throne of God in Jerusalem, it was spiritualized and became a mystery in which the throne was at God's right hand. The king also rules in a mysterious fashion.

The messianic promise was for a king to reign on the throne of David. When the Jews rejected Jesus as the promised messiah, it was necessary for the apostles, including Paul, to reinterpret the kingdom in order to keep their faith in Jesus as the anointed one. It is very likely that all the apostles were in agreement with Paul in this new, spiritualized interpretation of the kingdom, for there is no hint of any disagreement with them on this matter in his epistles, or in the other New Testament epistles. As we have seen, however, they did disagree on other matters. According to Paul's gospel, the good news is that Christ Jesus is reigning over the kingdom from the right hand of God from whence he will continue to reign until all his enemies have, one by one, been destroyed – the last of these being Death.

4) The Parousia and Resurrection Followed by Judgment.

I have shown above how he erred grievously in teaching and preaching that this would occur within his own lifetime. It was nevertheless the sure promise of Jesus, a fact that demonstrates once again Paul's familiarity with the Jesus Tradition. Because of the simple fact that Jesus has not yet returned to receive those who are eagerly awaiting him, this event yet comprises a key element in the prophetic ministry of the churchmen. I shall not dwell on this event because, with the exception of the timing, Paul's doctrine seems well in accord with the teaching of Jesus. Paul did not teach that Jesus was returning to rule over the earth in a millennial restoration of the kingdom on earth. From his teaching of the Thessalonians we see clearly that he anticipated that in the resurrection at the return of Christ, the saints will be caught up in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so shall ever be with the Lord (I Thessalonians 4:17). This was entirely in accord with the doctrine of Jesus, who taught that he was going to prepare a place for the disciples and that he would return to

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. . . take you to myself, that where I am there you may be also (John 14:1-3).

In the synoptics he expressed himself similarly:

Then he will send out his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven (Mark 13:27).

Yet again he has been attending to the Jesus Tradition, which includes a judgment in which the Lord says to those at his right hand,

Come, O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world (Matthew 25:34).

Paul surely understood that the saints are to inherit the kingdom, precisely as Jesus had taught. And just as Jesus described God's vengeance on the wicked on that day, so also Paul. He wrote that

. . . when the Lord Jesus is to be revealed from heaven in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance upon those who do not know God and upon those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (II Thessalonians 1:7, 8).

The mystery here is why, since so much of his Gospel is in accord with the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, he failed to give credit! I believe this mystery is dispersed when we see Paul as I have portrayed him above.

5) The Last Event in Paul's Gospel – the End

This final event in Paul's gospel will come after Christ has destroyed "every rule and every authority and every power." This doubtless includes, but is not confined to, the sentence of everlasting destruction on the wicked at the judgment. But after he has destroyed every other power, he will then deliver the kingdom to God the Father, and will himself become submissive to him.

This fanciful portrayal of a mysterious change of administration in the very highest place has always been a problem in my thinking. It suggests that the risen Christ is not now subject to the Father, and therefore the kingdom is as yet only the kingdom of Christ and not yet the kingdom of God. I believe that here Paul is involved in a confusion of complex ideas based on his understanding of Psalms 8 and 110. He must reign, says Paul,

. . . until he puts all his enemies under his feet (I Corinthians 15:25).

This may be drawn from Psalms 8:6 (thou hast put all things under his feet) and Psalm 110:1 (The Lord says to my lord, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool"). Psalm 110 is certainly a prophecy of the enthronement of the Messiah. But Psalm 8, the only one that speaks of putting all things "under his feet," as the context clearly shows, refers to the giving of dominion over all creatures to the first man, Adam, and to Adam's descendants, collectively described as "the son of man" (Genesis 1:28). Some (see Hebrews 2:5f) draw support for Jesus' designation of himself as "son of man" from this text. Paul understood it in that fashion, and found it necessary to go on to explain that "it is plain that he is excepted who put all things under him." In other words, God did not subject himself to the Son. It does not follow, however, that the Son will be subjected to the Father only after all things are put under him.

Paul's Great Failure

I define now the substance of Paul's great failure to adequately comprehend the Gospel. You

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note how he started by saying that he had delivered to the Corinthians as of first importance what he also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures. His gospel therefore began with the death of Jesus, and did not draw substantively on anything prior to that. It did not draw on the life of Jesus, or on the gospel that Jesus preached. It did not openly draw on the utterances of Jesus. It was "in accordance with the scriptures" but it was not in accordance with the words of the Lord. If he were standing before me at this moment, he might quickly direct my attention to his assertion that this gospel, which is of first importance, is what "I also received." But this must be read in the light of his statement in Galatians,

. . . the gospel, which was preached by me, is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from man nor was I taught it, but it came through a revelation of Jesus Christ (Galatians 1:11,12).

Therefore it did not come from the man, Jesus, but came only from the visions that appeared to Paul and that he identified with the risen Christ. He therefore saw no need of reliance on the utterances of Jesus of Nazareth, and gave little heed to them. Did the risen Christ then repeat the words of Jesus to Paul in his visions? No, for in that case, Paul's gospel would have conformed in every point to that of Jesus. Would the risen Christ have delivered a different message to Paul than he delivered to the disciples as Jesus of Nazareth? No, for Jesus assured us that, though heaven and earth pass away, his word will not pass away. It is therefore, according to Jesus, the permanent and final word from God to men.

I have been careful to note above, many times, that Paul was familiar with the Jesus Tradition, the early record of Jesus' words and deeds. But he drew specifically on this tradition very few times. Indeed, as near as I can tell, he only once drew on words of the Lord that could be definitive of his gospel, but he utilized it to instruct the church in eating and observing the Lords Supper. Since Paul wrote prior to the writing of the gospels, he must have derived these words from the Jesus Tradition, but he claimed that he received them from the Lord (I Corinthians 11:23). As explained above, he meant to be understood as receiving it from the risen Christ, and so in this case failed to credit Jesus of Nazareth.

The Law

The above survey of Paul's gospel draws primarily from I Corinthians 15 and presents the structure of five major events that form the basis of the good news. It remains to state how the individual person can receive the blessings of this gospel, that include forgiveness of sin, a new birth of the Spirit, the gift of eternal life, and the inheritance of the kingdom. Paul first found it necessary to deal with the Mosaic Code, "the law," which had formerly been the basis for receiving the divine blessing. His experience in Judaism convinced him that neither he nor anyone else could be justified before God through the law. He continued to consider the law as "good" and as laid down by God, but only as a "schoolmaster to lead us to Christ" (Galatians 3:24). It could teach us the meaning of sin and convict the conscience of sin but it could not give us a victory over sin, nor could it procure forgiveness. For Paul, it only led him into his "O, wretched man that I am!" state of despair. This despair was intensified by his understanding of God as a vengeful, wrathful deity, whose

. . . wrath is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and wickedness of men . . .
(Romans 1:18).

Nevertheless, the law was the "shadow of good things to come" (Hebrews 10:1). The Hebrew sacrificial system centered in the Temple and the priesthood, according to which the blood of lambs, bulls, and goats atoned for sin and cleansed the sinner, became for Paul the shadow of that good thing that came in Christ Jesus. Jesus Christ the substance (not the shadow), by his death and the shedding of his blood at Calvary, became the "Lamb of God" as decreed by John the Baptist. His blood was shed to atone for sin, becoming the substance of which the law was

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only a shadow.

Thus it was that “Christ died for our sins according to the scripture (I Corinthians 15:3).

Faith

And how, exactly, must one proceed to appropriate this fantastic blessing? Again, Paul found the answer in the Law, most expressly in the account of Abraham and his offering of Isaac as a sacrifice. I have reviewed this above in the discussion of Paul’s penchant for tampering with the Word of God. As he saw it, the fact that “Abraham believed God and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” meant that only one thing is necessary: believe! have faith! Justification, forgiveness, restoration to a new life before God is accomplished by one thing exclusive of all other considerations: faith. In particular the works of the law are excluded – the very means by which Paul had tried and failed to achieve justification before God. Believe that Jesus died for your sins and rose for your salvation, and you are saved! The resurrection of Jesus from the dead proved, for Paul, not only that he died for our sins, but that he is triumphant over all and is Lord of all. But they cannot believe, who have never heard (Romans 10:14), because “faith comes by hearing” so that many are called to go out into the world and preach the good news, following Paul’s example.

Grace

How does this work? Here Paul drew out of his store of astonishing ideas his concept of the “grace of God.” Paul thought that, by believing in Christ and his atoning sacrifice, God in his grace turns from his wrath and chooses to see us identified with Christ. We are identified with him in his death, so much so that we have literally died with Christ. As a result, the life that we now live we really live in the spirit of Christ and of God.

If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will give life to your mortal bodies also through his Spirit which dwells in you (Romans 8:11).

We have died with Christ, and have been born again to newness of life in him (Romans 6:4). As Paul expressed it to the Galatians,

I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Galatians 2:20).

In the light of this conviction Paul discovered that the righteousness of Christ was literally imputed to him so that, as Christ lived in him and gave life to his mortal body, so that body, moved by the Spirit of Christ, lived according to the righteousness of Christ. He discovered that without reference to the law he was now able to conform to the righteousness of God as expressed by the law! Covetousness was no more a problem!

But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the law and the prophets bear witness to it, the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe (Romans 3:21,22).

Conclusion

It is so beautiful in its conception and in its expression! How easy it is to understand how Paul was so thoroughly persuaded within himself and how he was able to persuade so many others and continues to do so. How tempting to forget that it doesn't work, as demonstrated by these

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two thousand years! How tempting to forget that it omits the very foundation of Truth, which is the message of Jesus of Nazareth – the very one it seeks to glorify! What a powerful deception was unleashed on the earth by the little Jew from Tarsus!