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The Gospel According to Paul

by T. Austin-Sparks  
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Preface

We are living in a time when many great changes of complexion are taking place in every realm. It is certainly no time of stagnation. Not only has the face of things greatly changed in half a life-time, but there is in these immediate days a tremendous acceleration in this change, so that we do not know what the world situation may be from one day to another.

What obtains in general is no less true - perhaps even more true - in Christianity. Everything is in a realm of question and uncertainty - that is, so far as the framework, the form, the work, the way and the earthly prospect are concerned. We can go further and say that - most probably in the sovereignty and providence of God - conditions (already so far advanced in the East) are literally compelling Christians to reconsider their foundations, and driving responsible people to face the whole question of demanded reorientation.

If we are nearing the consummation of this age, then this is exactly what we may expect. Only truth in its very essence will stand the test which will be forced upon everything by God Himself, and this "judgment must begin at the house of God". All the accessories, appurtenances, accompaniments, paraphernalia and 'etceteras' of Christianity will be stripped off, and only stark reality remain at the last. There is mentioned in Scripture a "fiery trial which shall come upon all the inhabited earth, to try the dwellers thereon". The tragedy of our time is that so many responsible leaders either are too busy and preoccupied with work or are so superficially optimistic that they are not aware of the real emergency implicit in world developments.

There is a growing need for such a stock-taking in many connections, but not least in the matter of the Gospel itself. Let us hasten to make clear that we are not implying that there is any need whatever for a reconsideration or reorientation of the essence of the Gospel. No, emphatically No! It, in its essential nature and constituents, remains 'The everlasting Gospel'. But there is a very real need for a fresh apprehension of what that Gospel really is. The very word or term "Gospel" has come to imply something less than "the whole counsel of God", and to be applied almost exclusively to the beginnings of the Christian life.

When the Apostle who wrote the Letter to the Hebrews had set forth the transcendent greatness of Christ, God's Son, in every realm, whether of Patriarchs, Prophets, Angels, or whom you will, he summed up everything - a vast everything - in one phrase: "so great salvation"; concerning which salvation he declared that even to neglect it - not necessarily to oppose or resist it - would involve in an inescapable doom.

In the pages of this little volume we have sought to serve this need of recovering, or re-presenting, something - only something - of the greatness of the Gospel, and to show that everything for life, service, progress, and victory depends upon our real grasp of its greatness.

T. AUSTIN-SPARKS  
 FOREST HILL,  
 LONDON, 1954.

Chapter 1 - In His Letter to the Romans

"...the gospel which I preach..." (Gal. 2:2).  
 "Now I made known unto you, brethren, the gospel which I preached unto you..." (1 Cor. 15:1).  
 "For I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not after man" (Galatians 1:11).

"The gospel which I preach". "The gospel which was preached by me".

There are in the New Testament four main designations for the basic matter with which it deals, the vital truth with which it is concerned, and those four designations are The Gospel, The Way, The Faith, and The Testimony. That which has now come to be known as 'Christianity' was then expressed by one or other of those designations. Of these four, the one used more than any other is the first - The Gospel. That title for the inclusive message of the New Testament occurs there at least one hundred times - that is, in the noun form, 'the Gospel'. In the corresponding verb form it occurs many more times, but unrecognised by us, because it is translated by several different English words. The verb form of this very same Greek word appears in our translation as 'to declare', 'to preach', 'to preach the gospel'. It would sound very awkward if you were to give a literal translation to this verb form. It would be just this - 'to gospel', 'to gospel people', 'to gospel the kingdom', or, to take the meaning of the word, 'to good-news', 'to good-tidings', and so on. That sounds very awkward in English, but in Greek that is exactly what was said. When they preached they conceived themselves as 'good-newsing' everything and everybody. To preach the gospel was simply to announce good tidings.

It is impressive that this word, this title, for the Christian faith - 'the gospel' - abounds in twenty of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The exceptions are: the Gospel by John, where you will not find it, nor will you find it in the three letters of John. You will not find it in Peter's second letter, nor will you find it in James or Jude. But these writers had their own titles for the same thing. We mentioned amongst the four, 'The Testimony': that is John's peculiar title for the Christian faith - often, with him, 'The Testimony of Jesus'. With James and Jude it is 'The Faith'. But you see how preponderating is this title of 'the good news', 'The Gospel'.

The Range of the Term 'The Gospel'

So we have to take account quite early of a most important fact. It is that this term, the good news, covers the entire range of the New Testament, and embraces the whole of what the New Testament contains. It is not just those certain truths which relate to the beginning of the Christian life. The gospel is not confined to the truths or doctrines connected with conversion and, in that limited sense, salvation - the initial matter of becoming a Christian. The gospel goes far beyond that. I repeat, it embraces all that the New Testament contains. It is as much the gospel in the profound letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians as it is in the letter to the Romans - perhaps no less profound a document, but often regarded as being mainly connected with the beginnings of the Christian life.

No, this term, the 'good tidings', covers the whole ground of the Christian life from beginning to end. It has a vast and many-sided content, touching every aspect and every phase of the Christian life, of man's relationship to God and God's relationship to man. It is all included in the good tidings. The unsaved need good news, but the saved equally need good news, and they constantly need good news. Christians constantly need some good news, and the New Testament is just full of good news for Christians. The servants of the Lord need good news. They need it as their message, the substance of their message. They need it for their encouragement and support. How much the Lord's servants need good news to encourage them in the work, and support in all the demand and cost of their labours! The Church needs good news for its life, for its growth, for its strength, for its testimony. And so the gospel comes in at every point, touches every phase.

Now as to our present method in the pages which follow. I would ask you to follow me carefully, and to grasp what I am trying to say by way of the foundation of this word. We are going to pursue what I am going to call the 'resultant' method: that is, to elicit the conclusion of the whole matter, rather than the particular aspect of any one portion of the New Testament.

Let me illustrate. Take, for instance, the letter to the Romans, which we are going to consider in a moment. We all know that that letter is the grand treatise on justification by faith. But justification by faith is shown to be something infinitely greater than most of us have yet grasped or understood, and justification by faith has a very wide connotation and relationship. All that is contained in this letter to the Romans resolves itself into just one glorious issue, and that is why it begins with the statement that what it contains is 'the gospel'. "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God... concerning his Son". Now all that follows is 'the gospel' - but what a tremendous gospel is there! And we have somehow to sum it all up in one conclusion. We have to ask ourselves: 'After all, what does result from our reading and our consideration of this wonderful letter?' You see, justification is not the beginning of things, neither is it the end of things, justification is the meeting point of a vast beginning and a vast end. That is, it is the point at which all the past eternity and all the future eternity are focused. That is what this letter reveals.

The God of Hope

Let us now look at it a little more closely in that particular light. What is the issue, what is the result? That result is gathered up into one word only. It is a great thing when you can get hold of a big document like this and put it into one word. What is the word? Well, you will find it if you turn to the end of the letter. It is significant that it comes at the point where the Apostle is summing up. He has written his letter, and he is now about to close. Here it is.

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope" (Rom. 15:13).

If your margin is a good one, it will give you references to other occurrences of that word in this same letter. You will find it as early as chapter 5, verse 4; you find it again in chapter 8, verses 24 and 25; again in chapter 12, verse 12; and then in the fifteenth chapter - first in verse 4, and finally here in our passage, verse 13. "The God of hope". That is the word into which the Apostle gathers the whole of this wonderful letter. This, then, is the gospel of the God of hope; more literally, the 'good news', or the 'good tidings', of the God of hope. So that what is really in view in this letter from start to finish is hope.

A Hopeless Situation

Now, quite obviously, hope has no meaning and makes no sense except in the light of the contrary - except as the contrary exists. The Divine method in this letter, therefore, in the first instance, is to set the good tidings over against a hopeless situation, in order to give clear relief to this great word - this ultimate issue, this conclusion, this result. A very, very hopeless situation is set forth. Look at the Divine method in this. The situation is set forth in two connections.

(a) In the Matter of Heredity

Firstly, it is exposed in regard to the race - the whole matter of heredity. If we look at chapter 5, with which we are so familiar, we see that there the whole race is traced back to Adam - "as through one man..." (verse 12). The whole race of mankind is traced right back to its origin and fountain-head in the first Adam. What is made clear in this chapter is this. There was a disobedient act through unbelief, resulting in the disruption of man's relationship with God. "Through the one man's disobedience" (verse 19), Paul puts it - not only here, but in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:21,22). And hence all men issuing from that man, Adam, became involved in that one act of disobedience and in its consequences - mainly the disruption of the relationship between man and God.

But that is not all. What immediately followed, as the effect of that act, was that man became in his nature disobedient and unbelieving. It was not just one isolated act which he committed, not just one thing into which he fell for a moment. Something went out of him, and something else entered into him, and man became by nature a disobedient and unbelieving creature. Not only did he act in that way, but he became that; and from that moment the very nature of man is unbelieving, the nature of man is disobedience. It is in his constitution, and all men have inherited that.

This is something that cannot be adjusted, you see. When you have become a certain kind of being, lacking a certain factor, you cannot adjust. You cannot adjust to what is not there. No man can believe unless it is given him of God to believe. Faith is 'not of ourselves, it is the gift of God' (Eph. 2:8). No man can be obedient to God apart from a mighty act of God in him causing him to be of an obedient nature or disposition. You cannot adjust to something that is not there. So the situation is pretty hopeless, is it not? Something has gone, and something else which is the opposite of that has come in and taken its place. That is the condition of the race here. What a picture of hopeless despair for the whole race! That is our heredity. We are in the grip of that.

You will, of course, agree that in other realms, in other departments of life, heredity is a pretty hopeless thing. We often use the very hopelessness of it as a line of argument by which to excuse ourselves. We say, 'It is how I am made: it is no use you trying to get me to do this - I am not made that way'. You are only arguing that you have in your constitution something that makes the situation quite impossible. And let me take this opportunity of emphasizing that it is quite hopeless for us to try to find in ourselves that which God requires. We shall wear ourselves out, and in the end come to this very position which God has laid down, stated and established - it is hopeless! If you are struggling to be a different kind of person from what you are by nature, trying to get over what you have inherited - well, you are doomed to despair: and yet how many Christians have never learned that fundamental lesson! For the whole race, heredity spells hopelessness. If this needs focusing at all, we have only to consider the conflict and battle that there is over believing God, having faith in God. You know that it is a deep work of the Spirit, of God in you that brings you, either initially or progressively, to believe. It is the "so-easily-besetting sin" - unbelief - followed, of course, by inability to obey. We are crippled at birth; we are born doomed in this matter by our heredity.

(b) In the Matter of Religious Tradition

Then the Lord takes this thing into another realm. I hope you recognise the meaning of the background, the dark background, against which this word 'hope' is placed. The Spirit of God through the Apostle takes it into the realm of religious tradition, as exemplified by the Jews. Everything now for them is traced back to Abraham and to Moses. What a lot the Apostle has to say about Abraham and his faith - "Abraham believed" - and then about Moses, and the Law coming in. And here is something of tremendous significance and importance that we must note, for here we see the particular function that was in view in God's sovereign choice of the Jewish nation. Have you ever thought of it like this? There are many things that could be said about the Jewish nation, their past, present and future, but what comes out so definitely here is their function in the sovereignty of God. It was, and still is, their function, so far as testimony is concerned, that is, the witness of their history. It was to show just one thing. You can have a grand father - I do not mean a grandfather! - and you may have the best religious tradition; but nothing of that is carried over in your heredity, that is, it does not pass into your nature.

What a father was Abraham! What a lot is made of "Abraham our father"! What a magnificent specimen of faith and obedience was Abraham! They were all of the stock of Abraham; as a nation, they derived from Abraham. And what a system was the Jewish system of religion, so far as standard is concerned, a moral, ethical, religious standard. There is nothing that can improve upon it in the religions of the world. What a magnificent system of religious precept was the Jewish religion, which came in through Moses! - not only the ten commandments, but all the other teaching that made up the Law, covering every aspect of man's life. And they were the children of that: yet what do you find here? You do not find the faith of Abraham in them, and you do not find the reflection of that great system in them, in their nature. These very people, deriving from such a one as Abraham, and being the inheritors of all those oracles of the Mosaic system, in their natures are devoid of everything that is represented by Abraham and Moses. These people are still characterized by - what? unbelief, in spite of Abraham; disobedience, in spite of Moses! What could be more hopeless?

Some people have the idea that, if they have a good father and a good mother, that puts them in a very secure position, but human nature does not bear witness to that. There may be advantages in having had godly forebears - some advantages; but it is no final guarantee that you are going to escape all the difficulties and all the conflicts and all the sufferings of getting your own faith. The fact is that parents can be utter for God, they can be the most godly, the most pious, and yet their children can be the most renegade. A strange thing, is it not? The disposition to faith and obedience is not in the blood. Religious tradition of the best kind does not change our nature. It may go back for generations - it does not change our nature. We are still unbelieving and disobedient in nature, however good our parents were. You may have prayed from the beginning for a loved child, from the time that it was the smallest babe; you may have sought to live before it for God: and yet here is that child self-willed, disobedient - everything else.

Hope in a Desperate Situation

How desperately hopeless this situation is! But that is the way in which the Lord establishes a setting for this tremendous thing that is called hope. And so we come to the transcendent solution, and I use that word carefully at this point, for here is something very great. This is an immense mountain, this mountain of heredity: but there is something that transcends the whole, gets above it all; a solution which rises above the whole hopelessness and despair of the natural situation; and that is what is called 'the gospel'. Oh, that must be good news! Indeed that is why it is called 'good news'! Good news! What is it? There is hope in this most desperate situation.

The Gospel in Eternity Past

Now, if we look at this letter again as a whole, we shall find that the good news, or the good tidings, of the gospel is not only in the Cross of the Lord Jesus - though that is the focal point of it, as we shall see in a moment. The good news, or the gospel, is found to be something very, very much bigger even than the Cross of the Lord Jesus! What is that? It is "the good tidings of God... concerning his Son... Jesus Christ our Lord". The Cross is only one fragment of the significance of Jesus Christ Himself.

So this letter, what does it do? It takes us right into the eternity of the Son of God. This is wonderful, if you grasp it. If this gospel does not save you, I do not know what will. Here we are taken right back into the past eternity of the Son. "Whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). He must have had His Son, the Master-Pattern, there in view before ever man was created, the eternal, the timeless, Pattern that the Son was: before there was any need of redemption, atonement, the Cross, the Son was the eternal Pattern of God for man. And, mark you, it is so positive, so definite. It is in that tense which means a definite, once-for-all act. "Whom he foreknew, he also foreordained". It is something which was done before time was. That is where the gospel begins.

Yes, we see the Son in His eternity as God's timeless Pattern; and then we have the eternity or timelessness of the redeeming sovereignty. The redeeming sovereignty is included in that. 'He foreordained, He called, He justified, He glorified'. Now these three remaining things are not subsequent. They all belong to the same time - which is not time at all; it is eternity. It does not say that He foreknew and foreordained, and then in course of time He called and He justified and He glorified. You see what you are committed to if you take that view. Most of us have been called and justified, but we are not glorified yet. But it says 'He glorified', in the 'once-for-all' (aorist) tense.

This must mean, then, that when He took this matter in hand in relation to His timeless Pattern, the Lord Jesus, He finished it all in sovereign purpose and intention. It was all rounded off then, so that the marred vessel is an incident in time; a terrible incident, a terrible tragedy, that the vessel was marred in the hand of the Potter; but, for all that, an incident in time. God's counsels transcend all that has come in in time. Dear friend, when the Lord projected the whole plan of redemption, it was not because something had happened calling for an emergency movement to try to save the situation on the spot. He had already anticipated the whole thing, and had got everything in hand to meet the contingency. The Lamb was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). The Cross reaches back over all time, right back over all sin, over the fall, over the first Adam - right back to the eternal Son, before times eternal. The Cross goes back there - to "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world".

What great hope is here! If that is true, if we can grasp that, that is good news, is it not? We make everything of the situation in ourselves which is so hopeless; God makes everything of His Son to meet our hopelessness. And God is not experimenting because something has gone wrong - 'We must find some kind of remedy for this, we must find something with which we can experiment to see if we can meet this emergency; man has gone sick, and we must look round for a remedy.' No; God has already covered it from eternity, met it from eternity, in His Son. It is the gospel, the good news, of God "concerning his Son". This may raise a number of mental problems, but here is the statement of this book. Hope, you see, is not destroyed because Adam falls: hope reaches back beyond man's sin.

You say, 'Then what about the Cross?' Well, the Incarnation and the Cross are only effecting what was settled in eternity - bringing out of eternity into time in a practical way, making effectual for man in his desperately needy condition, that great purpose, intention, design of God concerning His Son. The Cross is the means which lifts right up out of the trough, the valley, of human sin and failure, on to the level of the eternal counsels of God, and restores the even course of that which ultimately is eternally unaffected by what has happened in time. Tremendous good news, that, is it not? The Cross becomes the occasion of faith by which all this is transcended - of course it provides the ground for our faith - and when faith acts in relation to the Cross, what happens? We are brought into Christ: not brought into the Jesus of three and a half years, or even of thirty years, but brought into Christ as representing God's timeless thought for man. Faith brings us into that. That is the good news, "the good news concerning his Son"; the gospel, the good news of "the God of hope".

You see, hope is founded upon God's eternal provision outside of time: and that is a very safe rock upon which to stand! Yes, founded upon the eternal rock of Christ's Sonship, not upon an after-thought and an after-measure to meet something that has happened unexpectedly. Hope is grounded and anchored outside of time. The Apostle, writing to the Hebrews, uses a picture, a metaphor. "The hope... which we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and stedfast and entering into that which is within the veil" (Heb. 6:18,19); taking you outside of time, outside of this life, anchoring you there in eternity. How great is the Cross! How great is the message of Romans 6! It takes us right back beyond Moses, Abraham and Adam. It takes us right back past Adam's sin and failure, and the whole race's hopeless condition. The Cross takes us back before it all, and there in the past eternity links us up with what God intended. The Cross secures that. And with the other hand the Cross reaches right on into eternity to come, and says, "Whom he foreknew... them he also glorified" (Rom. 8:29,30). The Cross secures the coming eternal glory. How great is the Cross!

Hope, then, is resting upon the immensity of the Cross. Hope rests upon the fact that Christ, who passed this way, becoming the last Adam, being made sin for us, bearing it all, now raised by God, is seated at God's right hand, and therefore that we, as "in Christ" have been placed beyond any risk of another fall. I always think that this is one of the most blessed factors in the gospel - that Jesus in Heaven now, having been this way and the way of His Cross, says that this Adam will never fail. There will never be another fall. This heredity is secure, is safe, because linked with Him. There is no fear of our being involved in any more falls of that kind, no fear at all. It is indeed a wonderful hope, this gospel of the God of hope!

Do you see how very vividly the dark picture of hopelessness is drawn? I have only given you the outline, but you look at the details - the terrible picture of the Gentiles and the Jews drawn in the first chapters of this letter, and the hopelessness of the situation for both. Yes, despair indeed - and then over it all written, Hope! The good news of hope stands over it all, in spite of it all, because hope rests upon God having before all things determined upon something which He will carry out, and which He has demonstrated by the Cross of His Son, Jesus Christ. You and I know, do we not, that when faith has acted in relation to the Cross of the Lord Jesus, something begins in us which reverses altogether the natural course of things. Now faith is growing, faith is developing; we are learning the way of faith, we are being enabled to trust God more and more. Everything has changed: obedience is now possible.

And there is another life, another nature, another power, in us, which has made for hope. A contradiction of the Christian faith is a despairing Christian, a hopeless Christian; one who is not marked by this great thing which is pre-eminently characteristic of God - hope. He is "the God of hope". The Lord make this true, that we are filled with hope, "rejoicing in hope". "Patient in tribulation" but "rejoicing in hope" (Rom. 12:12).

Chapter 2 - In His Letters to the Corinthians

We now pass to the letters to the Corinthians, and, again following our method, we seek to find that which will sum up all that these letters contain. After all the details, all that goes to make up these letters - and it is quite a lot - we ask: 'What does it amount to? What is the result with which we are left?' And once more we shall find that it is only the gospel again - forgive me putting it like that - it is just a matter of the gospel again from another angle, another standpoint.

We may be surprised to learn that the word 'gospel', or, as it would be in the original, the term 'good tidings', occurs in these two letters no fewer than twenty-two times: so that we are not just taking a little fragment and hanging an undue weight upon it. We need some fairly solid foundation upon which to base our conclusions, and I think that twenty-two occurrences of one special word in such a space forms a fairly sound basis. Whatever else these letters are about, they must be about that. Much of what you read in these letters might lead you to think it was not like that at all - it looks very bad; but what we are after is the resultant issue.

The Summing Up of the Letters

There is one very familiar sentence which sums up the whole of the two letters. It occurs, naturally, at the end of the second letter.

"The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the communion of the Holy Spirit, be with you all" (2 Cor. 13:14).

This is sometimes called 'the benediction' or 'the blessing'. That is, of course, man's title for it. But it is not just an appendix to a discourse - a conventional way of terminating things, a nice thought. Nor was it used by Paul as a kind of concluding good wish or commendation with which to terminate a meeting, as it is commonly used now. I suppose there is a blessing in it, but you have to look much more deeply than just at these phrases. Really it was a prayer, and a prayer in which was summed up the whole of the two letters which the Apostle had written. In Paul's wonderful way of comprehending much in few words, everything that he had penned through these two letters is in this way gathered up.

The Order of the Summing Up

It is perhaps important to note the order of these three clauses. The grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, the communion or fellowship of the Holy Spirit. That is not the order of Divine Persons. If it were the order of Divine Persons, it would have to be changed: 'The love of God, the grace of the Lord Jesus, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit'. But we have no need to attempt to put God right - to try to improve upon the Word of God and the Holy Spirit's order. This is not the order of Divine Persons. It is the order of the Divine process. This is the way along which God moves to reach His end, and that is exactly the summing up of these two letters. All the way through God is moving to an end, and this prayer of Paul's is according to the principle, the order, of Divine movement.

Let us now come to the words themselves, and see if we can find a little of the gospel - the 'good tidings' of these two letters - gathered into these three phrases.

The Grace of the Lord Jesus

What was the grace of the Lord Jesus? Well, if you look back in this second letter, to chapter 8, verse 9, you have it.

"Ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might become rich".

There are three quite simple elements in that statement. The Lord Jesus did something - He became poor; and what He did was voluntary - for grace ever and always carries that feature at its very beginning. It is that which is perfectly voluntary; not compelled, not demanded, under no obligation, but completely free. The grace of our Lord Jesus meant firstly a voluntary act. That is grace very simply, but it goes to the heart of things. So that is what He did - He became poor. And then the motive, as to why He did it: 'that we, through His poverty, might be made rich'.

I think that is a simple, and a very beautiful, analysis and synthesis of grace. He became poor - He did it without compulsion - and in so doing His motive was that we might become rich.

Now, you see, you have here in the Lord Jesus a Person and a nature wholly and utterly, fully and finally, different from any other human being; a nature completely contrary to the nature of man, as we know it. Human nature as we know it is being rich, doing anything to become rich, and anybody else can be robbed to make us rich. That does not necessitate taking a pistol and putting it at people's heads. There are other ways of getting advantages to ourselves, at other people's expense or otherwise. There is really no 'grace' about man, as we know him. But the Lord Jesus is so different from this! Christ is altogether different - an altogether other nature.

Now the whole of the first letter to the Corinthians is crammed full of the self-principle. I am assuming that you are more or less familiar with these letters. I cannot take you through page after page, verse after verse; but I am giving the result of close reading, and you can verify it if you care to. I repeat: the whole of the first letter to the Corinthians is just full of the self-principle - self-vindication, going to law to get their own rights, self-seeking, self-importance, self-indulgence - even at the Lord's Table - self-confidence, self-complacency, self-glory, self-love, self-assertiveness, and everything else. You find all these things in that first letter, and more. 'I' - a great, an immense 'I' - stands inscribed over the first letter to the Corinthians. This is the nature, the old nature, showing itself in Christians. Everything that is contrary to "the grace of the Lord Jesus" comes to light in that letter, and the Lord Jesus stands in such strong, clear, terrible contrast to what we find there.

In our last chapter we sought to show that, in order to reveal the glory of the good tidings as the good tidings of the God of hope, the Divine method was to paint the hopelessness of the picture as it really was and is for human nature. Now, in order to reach the Divine end, the Holy Spirit does not cover up the faults, the weaknesses - even the sins, the awful sins - of Christians. The grace of God is enhanced by the background against which it stands. And so, while we might feel, 'Oh, what a pity that this letter was ever written! What an exposure, what an uncovering, of Christians! What a pity ever to speak about it - why not hide it?' - ah, that is just where the good tidings find their real occasion and value.

You see, they are the good tidings of the benediction. The good tidings here are found right at the very beginning of the letter. God knows all about these folk. He is not just finding out - He knows the worst. Dear friend, the Lord knows the worst about you and about me, and He knows it all; and it is a poor kind of all! Now, He knew all about these Corinthians, and yet, under His hand, this Apostle took pen and began his letter with - what? 'To the church in Corinth', and then: "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called saints". Now, is that pretending? Is that make-believe? Is that putting on blinkers and saying nice things about people? Not a bit! I repeat: God knew it all, and yet said, "sanctified in Christ Jesus... saints".

Do you say, 'Oh, I cannot understand that at all!'? Ah, but that is just the glory of His grace, because the grace of the Lord Jesus comes out here in calling such people saints. Now, you do not call such people saints; you reserve that word for people of a very different kind. We say, 'Oh, he is a saint' - distinguishing him, not from people who are unsaved, but amongst good people. Now, God came right to these people, knowing this whole black, dark story, and said: "saints"; and that other word, "sanctified in Christ Jesus" is only another form of the same word 'saints'. It means 'separated' - separated in Christ Jesus. You see, the very first thing is the position into which the grace of the Lord Jesus puts us. It is positional grace. If we are in Christ Jesus, all these lamentable things may be true about us, but God sees us in Christ Jesus and not in ourselves. That is the good tidings, that is the gospel. The wonder of the grace of the Lord Jesus! We are looked at by God as separated, sanctified in Christ Jesus. That is where God begins His work with us, putting us in a position in His Son where He attributes to us all that the Lord Jesus is.

Now, you can break that up in this letter. "Christ Jesus, who was made unto us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption" (1 Cor. 1:30). He is made unto us righteousness, sanctification, redemption. I am afraid that some Christians are afraid to make too much of their positional grace. They think that it will take something away from their Christian life if they make too much of that, because they put such a tremendous amount of emphasis upon the need for their sanctification, actually, as to condition; and they are so occupied introspectively with this matter of what they are in themselves and trying to deal with that, that they lose all the joy of their position in Christ through grace.

We need to keep the balance in this matter. The beginning of everything is that the grace of the Lord Jesus comes to us - even though we may be like the Corinthians - and sets us and looks upon us as in a place of sainthood, "sanctified in Christ Jesus". You cannot describe it. Grace goes beyond all our powers of describing, but there is the wonder of the grace of the Lord Jesus. The fact of the matter is that we really only discover what awful creatures we are after we are in Christ Jesus, and after we have been in Him a long time. I think the longer we are in Christ, the more awful we become in our own eyes. Therefore, if we are in Christ Jesus, what we are in ourselves does not signify. Our position does not rest upon whether we are actually, literally, truly perfect. The good tidings first of all has to do with our position in Christ.

Ah, but it does not stop there. This does not introduce any kind of shadow, or it should not. Thank God, it is good tidings beyond even that. The grace of our Lord Jesus can make the state different - can make our standing lead to a new state. That is the grace of the Lord Jesus. It can make our own actual state now correspond to our standing. Grace not only receives into the position of acceptance without merit: grace is a working power to make us correspond to the position into which we have been brought. Grace has many aspects. Grace is acceptance, but grace is power to operate. "My grace is sufficient for thee" (2 Cor. 12:9). That is the mighty word of power in need. The grace of our Lord Jesus is indeed good news - good news for all Christians.

The Love of God

After "the grace of the Lord Jesus" "the love of God". See how God is moving to His end. Now the second letter to the Corinthians is as full of the love of God as the first is full of the grace of the Lord Jesus. It is a wonderful letter of the love of God, and of its mighty triumph, its mighty power. The love of God is God's present-day method of showing His power. If that will not do it, nothing will. What God is doing in this dispensation, He is doing by love. Let that be settled. Not by judgment, not by condemnation. The Lord Jesus said He did not come to condemn, He had come to save (John 12:47; cf. 3:17). Yes, it is the love of God which is the method of His power in this dispensation. The method will change, but this is the day of the love of God.

Now, Paul has already, toward the end of the first letter, given that classic definition and analysis of the love of God - 1 Corinthians 13. There is nothing to compare with it in all the Bible as an analysis of - not your love, not my love; we are not interested in that - but the love of God. "Love suffereth long and is kind, love envieth not, love seeketh not its own, is not puffed up, doth not behave itself unseemly", and so on. There is the love of God set forth. We shall find that we cannot stand up to it. No man can stand up to that fully. "Love never faileth" - never gives up, that is. Here is the quality of Divine love.

Now bring it into the second letter to the Corinthians, and see the mighty triumph, the power, of the love of God. First of all, see it as working triumphantly in the servant of the Lord. Look again at the letter. Paul has in different places in his writings given very wonderful, very beautiful, very glorious revelations of the grace of God in his own life; but, considering the setting, I do not think there is anything anywhere in the New Testament that so wonderfully sets forth the triumph of the love of God in a servant of God, as does this second letter to the Corinthians. If ever a man had reason to give up, to wash his hands, to despair, to be fiercely angry, to be everything but loving, Paul had reason for such a reaction in regard to the Corinthians. He might have been well justified in closing the situation at Corinth, and saying: 'I am done with you, I wash my hands of you, you are incurable. The more I love you, the more you hate me. All right, get on with it; I leave you.' Look at this second letter: the outgoing, the overflowing, of love to these people - to these people - over that situation. What a triumph of love, the love of God, in a servant of God! That is how God reaches His end. Oh, God give us more love, as His servants, to bear and forbear, to suffer long, and never to despair.

Yes, but it was not left there. You can see it, even if it is only beginning - and I think it is more than that - in the Corinthians themselves, as he speaks to them about the result of his strong speaking, his pleading, his rebuking, his admonishing, his correcting. The terms that he uses about them are their sorrow, their godly repentance, and so on. It was worth it, the love of God triumphing in a people like that; and you know that that is what made possible the wonderful, beautiful things that Paul was able to write to them in the second letter. Paul could never have committed himself to write some of the things that are in this second letter, but for some change in those people, in their attitude, in their disposition, in their spirit; but for the fact that he had got this basis of triumphant love.

For this second letter has to do with ministry, with testimony, and Paul would be the last man in the world ever to suggest that anybody could have a ministry and a testimony who knew nothing about the conquering love of God in their own nature. Paul was not that kind of man. It is, alas, possible to preach and be a Christian worker, and know nothing of the grace of the Lord Jesus in your own life - to be just a contradiction. There is far too much of that. Paul would never countenance anything like that. If he is going to speak about ministry and about testimony in the world, he will demand a basis, that grace shall have done its work at least in measure, so that in this way the love of God is now manifested. There is now humility: 'Oh, what godly sorrow', he says, 'what godly repentance!' Where is the 'I'? Where is the self-hood? Something has broken, something has given way; there is something now of the grace of the Lord Jesus, in self-emptying, in the negation of the self-life. Yes, they are down now, broken. This is the triumph of Divine love in such a people.

That is the gospel, the good tidings! It is good tidings, is it not? The gospel is not just something to bring the sinner to the Saviour. It is that - but the gospel, the good tidings, is also this, that people, Christians like Corinthians, can be transformed like this through the love of God. Good tidings! The glory of the triumph comes following on here, in words that we love so much: "Thanks be unto God, who always leadeth us in triumph in Christ" (2 Cor. 2:14), to celebrate His victory over Christ's enemies. This is the triumphal procession of grace and love. It is a different Paul, is it not? - a Paul different from the first letter. He has got the wind in his sails now, he is running before the wind, he is in triumph. He is talking about everything being a triumphal procession in Christ, a constant celebration of victory. What has made Paul change? Why, the change in them! Yes, it was always like that with Paul; his life was bound up with the state of the Christians. 'Now I live if you stand fast' (1 Thess. 3:8). 'This is life to me.'

"And the love of God". "God, that said, Light shall shine out of darkness... shined in our hearts, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ. But we have this treasure in earthen vessels, that the exceeding greatness of the power may be of God, and not from ourselves" (2 Cor. 4:6,7). 'We are poor creatures, Corinthians: I am, you are; but God has shined into our hearts. Something has been done in our hearts. The love of God has come in. Fragile vessels as we are in ourselves, that love shines forth - the glory of the love of God.'

The Communion of the Holy Spirit

"The communion (or fellowship) of the Holy Spirit". Did ever a people need to know the meaning of fellowship more than the Corinthians? Is Paul touching upon some spot that was a very, very sensitive spot? Fellowship? He wrote: "Each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" (1 Cor. 1:12). Is there any fellowship in that, any communion in that? No. When you stay in the flesh, there is no fellowship, there is no communion; you are all in bits and pieces, all flying at one another. So it was. What is God after? Fellowship, communion, amongst believers; and it must be the communion, the fellowship, of the Holy Spirit, that is, fellowship constituted and established and enriched by the Holy Spirit. This is the result of "the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God" - oneness.

Let us clearly recognise that this is the deepest work of the Holy Spirit. Much has been said earlier, in Paul's first letter, about the Holy Spirit. They had made much of spiritual gifts; spiritual gifts attracted them. They were enamoured of power to do things, of signs, wonders, and so on. That was very much after their heart; these gifts of the Spirit, and much more that was just outward, brought a great deal of gratification to their souls.

But when you come to the supreme end and deepest work of the Holy Spirit, you find it in the oneness of believers. It takes the deepest work of the Holy Spirit to bring that about, seeing that we still have a nature that is an old nature. We still can be Christians, and yet Corinthian Christians. There is still lurking - and not always in hidden corners - the 'I', the self-life in some form or other. Seeing it is there, it takes a mighty work of the Holy Spirit to unite indissolubly even two believers; but to unite a whole church like that is something stupendous.

Nothing less or other than that is the communion, the fellowship, of the Holy Spirit. Something of that seems to have come about at Corinth. Oh, wonder of wonders, the difference between these two letters! Yes, it has happened. It is an inward triumph over nature, and it shows real progress. That is the communion of the Holy Spirit. When Paul started his first letter, he said: 'When every one of you says, I, I, I, are you not babes? Do you not have to be fed with milk?' (1 Cor. 3:1-4). Babies are always scrapping and fighting. That was the Corinthians. But they had got past the babyhood stage, through "the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God". Things changed; they have grown up.

It takes the Holy Spirit to make us grow up spiritually in this way. The measure of our spirituality can be indicated very quickly and clearly by the measure of our mutual love, our fellowship. We are, after all, little people spiritually if we are always at variance. It takes big people to live with certain other big people without quarrelling. It takes "the grace of the Lord Jesus, and the love of God", to lead to "the fellowship of the Holy Spirit".

This fellowship of the Holy Spirit, then, is essentially corporate. Perhaps you have thought that this last clause, "the communion of the Holy Spirit", meant your communion with the Holy Spirit and that of the Holy Spirit with you. It does not mean that at all. Paul is perhaps just gently hitting back at the old state, touching on that old condition. 'What you Corinthians lacked more than you lacked anything else was fellowship; there was no fellowship. Now you have come along the way of the grace of the Lord Jesus and the love of God "and the communion of the Holy Spirit" is found amongst you'. That is what it means. It is corporate, and it is a mighty work of the Holy Spirit. It has to be in more than one of us. Now you, of course, think it has to be in the other person! No, it has to be in more than one of us, not just the other person. It must be in you and me - it must be in everyone concerned. Well, that is the gospel: good tidings to a people in a pretty bad state! What good tidings!

Let me close with this. We never get anywhere by recognising the deplorable state and just going for it - beginning to knock people about, wielding the sword or the sledge-hammer and smashing things, bringing people down under condemnation. We never get anywhere that way. If Paul had gone to work that way with Corinth, he would have smashed it all right, but that would have been the end of it. But love found a way, and, although there was brokenness, it was not the end. Something, "beauty for ashes", came out of it - because "the grace of the Lord Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit", was the principle upon which Paul himself lived and by which he worked.

You and I must be people of good news. We have got good news for any situation, though it be as bad as that in Corinth. Believe this! Good news! Good news! That must be our attitude to everything, by the grace of God; not despairing, not giving up. No, good news! The Lord make us people of the gospel, the good tidings.

Chapter 3 - In His Letter to the Galatians

We now pass into the letter to the Galatians, where we actually have the phrase which is basic to this consideration - "the gospel which I preach". The phrase is found in the second chapter and the second verse, and in another form in chapter one, verse eleven - "the gospel which was preached by me". We have noted how many times this word 'gospel' occurs in the letters of Paul. The word is sprinkled through his letters, indicating by the frequency of its occurrence that that, after all, is what he is really writing about. The same thing is true in this brief letter to the Galatians. In the noun form - that is, where the whole body of Christian truth is called 'the gospel' - it occurs in this letter eight times; and then in the verb form - which cannot be translated into English correctly, that is, 'to gospel' or 'to good news', translated for our convenience into English as 'preach', 'preach the gospel', 'bring good tidings', and so on, but just one word in the original - in the verb form it is found in this letter six times: so that we have here fourteen occurrences in a very brief letter.

The Situation Among the Galatian Christians

Now, if we could reconstruct the situation presented by this letter, or come upon it in actual reality, what should we find? Supposing that the situation represented here existed in some place today, and we visited that place where this thing was going on, what should we come upon? Well, we should find a tremendous controversy in progress, with three parties involved. On the one hand, we should find a group of men who are extremely and bitterly anti-Paul. On the other hand, we should find Paul roused and stirred to the very depths of his being, as we never find him in any other place in his writings or in his journeys. And, in between these two parties, there would be the Christians who are the immediate occasion of this tremendous battle that is going on. Very much bigger issues than the local and the occasional are involved, because it is a matter of the far-reaching and abiding nature of the gospel. Now Paul, in the battle, is committing himself to a re-statement of 'the gospel which he preached', over against these who were seeking to undermine, neutralise and destroy his ministry altogether. What was it all about?

Well, first of all, take the anti-Paul party. What is their trouble? What is it that they are seeking to establish? In brief, in a word, their object is to establish the old, Jewish, religious tradition. They are standing vehemently for the permanence of that system. They are arguing that it came directly from God, and what comes directly from God cannot be changed or set aside. This thing has the support of antiquity. It is the thing which has obtained and has existed for many centuries, and therefore it carries the value of being something that is not, like Paul's teaching, something quite new. It is established in the ages of the past. They would go further, and say that Jesus did not abrogate the law of Moses: He said nothing about the law of Moses being set aside. Well, there is all this argument, and much else besides. Their position is that Judaism, the Law of Moses, is binding upon Christians. 'Be Christians, if you like, but you must add to your Christian faith the Law of Moses, and you must come under the government of all the Thou Shalts and Thou Shalt Nots of that tradition and that system; you must conform to the teachings and the practices of the Jewish system, of the tradition of Moses.' That is their position in brief.

On the other hand, there is Paul. He is no stranger to Moses, no stranger to the Jewish system. Born, bred, brought up, trained and very thoroughly taught in it all, nevertheless here he is found directly and positively opposed to their position. He argues that the Law was given by God indeed, but it was only given by God to show up man's weakness. The real value and effect of the Law is to show what man is like - that he just cannot keep it. How hopeless man is in the presence of God's demands! How helpless he is before this whole system of commandments - Thou Shalt and Thou Shalt Not! And though Christ did not abrogate the Law, set it aside, and say, 'That is all finished', Christ in Himself was the only One, the only One amongst all human beings that ever walked this earth, who could keep it; and He did keep it. He satisfied God in every detail of the Divine Law; and, having satisfied God and fulfilled the Law, He introduced and constituted another basis of relationship with God, and, thus the Law is in that way set aside. Another foundation of life with God is brought in by Jesus Christ.

That is Paul's argument in brief. Of course, there are many details in it, but Paul comes to the opposite conclusion to that which these Judaizers had reached. The Mosaic law is no longer binding upon Christians in the way in which it was binding upon the Jews. The argument of Paul is that in Christ we are freed from the Law. The great word in this letter is liberty in relation to the Law.

From the strong terms used in this letter we can gather how intense are the feelings of those concerned. Of course, these Judaizers are very, very strong. They have pursued Paul wherever he has gone. They have sought by every means, by personal attack and by argument and persuasion, to undo his work and to lead away his converts from him and bring them back to Moses. Paul is found here, as I have said, in a state of perfect vehemence. This Paul, so capable of forbearance and longsuffering and patience, as we saw in our last chapter in the case of the Corinthians, where every kind of provocation to anger was met by him - the wonderful, wonderful patience and forbearance of Paul with those people - yet here the man seems to have become stripped of all such forbearance: here he is literally hurling anathemas at these men. Twice over, with a double emphasis, he says, "Let him be anathema... so say I now again, Let him be anathema" - accursed.

Now, when Paul gets like that, there must be something involved. For a man like Paul to be worked up in that way, you must conclude that there is something serious on hand. And indeed there is, and this very heat of the Apostle indicates how serious was the difference between these two positions.

The Answer to the Situation

Now, in the letter we may feel that there is much mysterious material. For instance, in drawing upon Old Testament types, Paul uses as an allegory the incident of Hagar and Ishmael. We know the details; we are not going into that at all. There seems to be a lot of mysterious material that Paul is using for his argument. But when we have read it all through and considered it and felt the impact of it, what does it all amount to? When we have studied this and been impressed with its seriousness, what is it that we are left with? Is it just a conclusion about legalism - that the Law no longer holds us in bondage, and we are freed from it? Is it that a dispensation of liberty in that respect has been introduced, and that its principles are no longer binding upon us? Is that just the position? Is it that Christianity is something without obligations as to truth and as to practice? Is it that grace will override all our breaking of laws and violating of principles? - a false interpretation of grace indeed! - but is it that? What is it?

You see, it is possible to grasp very truly the value of a letter like this, but for it to remain, after all, just a theological matter, a mere matter of doctrine. Yes, the letter to the Galatians teaches that we are no longer under the Law of Moses, and that we are free as children of God. Very nice, very beautiful! But where is that going to lead you? What does it amount to? All that is negative.

I wonder - and this is the whole point just now - I wonder how many of us are really living in the enjoyment of the secret and heart of the gospel, as it is presented in this letter. Paul is saying much here about the gospel or the good tidings. What really is the gospel, or the good tidings, as found here in this letter and in this particular connection? After all, it is not just that Christians want to be 'libertised' - freed from all restraints, from all bondage and all obligations, just to do as they like, follow their own inclinations. That is not it at all. You and I want to know something more positive than that. We cannot be satisfied with mere negatives.

Christ Within

What does the gospel amount to here? Paul says, 'This is the gospel'. It is summarised in one fragment of this letter, a very well-known passage of Scripture, at which we all rejoice - Galatians 2:20: "I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I that live, but Christ liveth in me". This is the gospel, the good tidings, of the indwelling Christ. This is the heart of the whole matter, this is the answer to the whole argument, this settles all the questions, this deals with all the difficulties - the gospel, the good news, of the indwelling Christ.

And, when you think of it, this is the most vital and fundamental factor in Christianity. No wonder Paul saw that, if this was sacrificed, Christianity went for nothing: the Judaizers had carried everything away; Christianity had become of no meaning at all. He was fighting, therefore, for Christianity on one point only - but one which included the whole. The whole was wrapped up and bound up with this: "Christ liveth in me". If that is true, you do not need to argue about anything at all; all the argument is settled.

"Christ liveth in me". Christ! What is Christ? Who is Christ? What does Christ mean? What does He embody? Why, everything that satisfies God is found in Christ! In His Son Jesus Christ, God has His full, final, complete answer. Christ can stand up to every demand of God, and has done so. Christ can bring the full and complete favour of God wherever He is. Oh, we could stay long with that - what Christ is, how great Christ is, how wonderful Christ is! And "Christ liveth in me"! Christ, that Christ of the eternal glory, that Christ of the self-emptying, humiliation, that Christ of the triumphant life, that Christ of the mighty Cross, of the resurrection, of the return to glory, and of the enthronement now, is in you and in me! What more can we want - what more could we have - what greater thing than that?

The Power of Christ Within

Now Christ is an actual, living Person: not an abstract idea, an historical figure, but an actual, living Person. "Christ liveth in me". I do not wear a crucifix of a dead Christ on the outside. I have a living Christ within, the good news of a living Christ inside. You can read that, or hear it said, and you can nod your head and say, 'Yes, Amen': you agree with that! But I have known people to hear that for years, and agree with it as heartily as you do - and then one day to wake up to it. 'You know, after all I have heard about that, I have only just come to realise that it is true that Christ really lives in me!' It is something more than the doctrine of Christ within - it is the experience.

Paul focuses his whole history as a Christian and as a servant of God upon that one thing. 'God has shined in my heart' (2 Cor. 4:6). 'It pleased God, who separated me from my birth, to reveal His Son in me' (Gal. 1:15,16). 'The gospel which I preached was not of man', "but... through revelation of Jesus Christ" (Gal. 1:11,12). How did it come? Not only objectively and outwardly, but inwardly. 'God has shined within'. "Christ liveth in me". The most startling thing that ever happened to a man in the course of human history was that which happened to Saul of Tarsus on that noonday when he realised that Jesus of Nazareth, who he thought was done with, dead and buried, was alive, alive, actually alive. Remember how very alive He was. And Paul says: 'That One liveth - and not only in the glory - He liveth in me, in me!' A living Person, a living actual power within, yes, a real power inside, is Christ.

The Intelligence of Christ Within

Furthermore, He is a real Intelligence, who possesses the full knowledge of all that God wants, and, possessing that, dwelling within me, is the repository and vehicle of God's full will for my life. Full intelligence by Christ within! All the knowledge that Christ possesses is within, and if that is true, if Christ is within - the Apostle, of course, is speaking here not only about Christ within, but much about the Holy Spirit, to which we will come presently - if the indwelling Christ has His way, then that which He is becomes actual in the life of the child of God: the fact that He is a living Person, the fact that He is a mighty power, the fact that He is a full, Divine Intelligence.

Christ Within the Knowledge of the Will of God

We would like to have all understanding in our mind, all knowledge and intelligence in our reason. We have not got it, but we have another kind of intelligence. The true child of God has another kind of intelligence, altogether different from that which is of the reason. We do not know how to explain and interpret it, but somehow we know. We can only say, 'We know'. We know what the Lord does not want where we are concerned. We find it impossible to be comfortable along any line that the Lord does not want, and we come to that position so often. We put it in different ways, but we have to say, 'I know the Lord does not want me to do that, to go that way; it is as deep in me as anything. To do it would be to violate something that relates to my very life with God.'

That is on the negative side. And on the positive, if the Lord really wants something, we know it; in spite of everything, we know it. If only we will wait for that, it will be so sure. The trouble is that we cannot wait for the Lord; we get into such tangles over these problems of guidance. But when the Lord's time comes, there is no question about it at all: we know. How do we know? It is spiritual knowledge, it is spiritual intelligence. It is Christ dwelling within, in possession of all the mind of God.

Now, here are these poor Galatian Christians, torn between the Judaizers and Paul. They do not know what to make of this. These, on the one side, are so strong about their line of things; and on the other hand, here is Paul, saying that they are all wrong! What are they to do? The answer comes: 'If Christ is in you, you will know - you will know what you ought to do'. And that is the only real way of knowing what you ought to do - what is right, and what is wrong. Christ in you. But you will know.

Christ Within the Power of Endurance

Now you say, 'I have not realised that, I do not feel that, I do not see that; I have not got all that intelligence, I do not sense all that power'. You see, as Paul is always trying to point out, there is such a great difference between the human kind of knowledge and spiritual knowledge. We have knowledge of this kind, not by information, but by experience.

Some of us have been on the Christian way for many years. If it had been left to us, should we be still going on with the Lord? If we had had to carry on, struggle through, fight it out, on our own resources, should we still be here? I think I can say for you as for myself, Certainly not! We would not be here today; we should not be rejoicing in the Lord, going on with the Lord. If Satan could have had his way, we should not be here, for both in ourselves and in Satan we have found every conceivable thing inimical to Christ, to make it impossible for us to go on with the Lord. Everything in our own selves is against us spiritually. Everything in Satan is up against us, and everything that he can use is thrown into the battle for our undoing.

But we are here, and that is the proof that Christ in us is a living power, and it is found - though not yet in fulness - in experience, in fact, and not just in our sensing it. We would like to have the sensations of this great power, to feel it; but no, there is often the hiding of His power, and it only comes out in facts - often in quite long-term facts.

The Disposition of Christ Within

Power, intelligence, knowledge: and then disposition. This is one of the realities of the Christian life. When Christ is within, we have a different disposition altogether. We are disposed to new things, disposed in new ways. Yes, our disposition has changed. The things which we once found to be our life no longer draw us to them. We are not disposed to them any longer. This is the world's problem with the Christian: 'Why do you not do this, that and the other?' And the only answer we can give, but which never satisfies them, is, 'I have lost all disposition for that sort of thing: I am no longer disposed that way: I have a disposition in another direction altogether.' It is like that: another disposition - Christ within. That is Christianity!

You see, Moses says, 'You have got to do this, and you have got to do that, and you must not do this, and you must not do that'; and my disposition is altogether against Moses. Moses says, 'You must do this' - I do not want to do it; it may be quite right, it may have come from God, but I just do not find it in my nature, in my disposition, to do it. Moses said, 'I must not do this', and my disposition says, 'I want to do that - that is just the very thing that I do want to do!' Somehow or other, in myself I am just across God in every way.

What is the solution to the Law? Christ in you. If Christ is in you, then you will be disposed to do what God wants you to do, and you will fulfil the Law. If Christ is in you, you will have no disposition for doing what God does not want you to do, and you will again fulfil the Law. But, you see, you fulfil it on another basis altogether. You fulfil it, not because Moses said it, but because Christ is in you; not because you must, but because Christ gives you another disposition. This is the gospel, the good news, of the indwelling Christ.

The Work of the Holy Spirit Within

Now, when you turn to the teaching about the Holy Spirit in this letter, you find that it comes to the same thing. Christ in you is the Holy Spirit's standard and He is working in you on the basis of the indwelling Christ to bring you into line with Christ, to build you up according to the Christ who is in you. The Holy Spirit is the energy of Christ within, the energy to make us Christ-like, to enable us to be like Christ, and therefore to be fulfillers of everything that is right in the sight of God, and shunners of everything that is not right in the sight of God. There is an energy by the Holy Spirit to do this.

The Apostle speaks about the fruit of the Spirit. "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22,23). The Spirit, you see, is inside, and He is the Spirit of Christ within to cause that the fruits of Christ shall be borne in us, or, shall we say, the fruit of Christ which shows itself in all these many ways. The fruit of Christ is "love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, meekness, self-control", the fruit of the mighty energy of the Spirit of Christ within.

And what about law? Yes, the Spirit works according to law. Before he is through, the Apostle says that tremendous thing, that terrible thing: "Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap. For he that soweth unto his own flesh shall of the flesh reap corruption; but he that soweth unto the Spirit shall of the Spirit reap eternal life" (Gal. 6:7,8). The law of the Spirit, you see, is this. Sow, and you reap; what you sow, you reap. Sow to the Spirit, and you reap life everlasting. If you sow to the Spirit - that is only saying, in figurative language, If you conform to the Spirit's energy, the Spirit's law, the Spirit's government, or to Christ in you - you will reap Christ, you will reap life. There is a law here, and 'free from the Law' does not mean that we are set free from any necessity for recognising that God has constituted His universe, our bodies and souls, upon principles; but it does mean this, that Christ in us makes it possible for us to obey the principles, whereas otherwise we should be violating them all the time.

"The gospel which I preach", says Paul: 'after all, it amounts to this - after all your arguments about legalism and Judaizers and the rest, it amounts to this: - "Christ liveth in me".' That is good news, that is hope - everything is possible!

Chapter 4 - In His Letter to the Ephesians

"...the word of the truth, the gospel of your salvation..." (Eph. 1:13).  
 "...the Gentiles are fellow-heirs, and fellow-members of the body, and fellow-partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel, whereof I was made a minister..." (3:6,7).  
 "...having shod your feet with the preparation of the gospel of peace..." (6:15).  
 "...praying... on my behalf, that utterance may be given unto me in opening my mouth, to make known with boldness the mystery of the gospel, for which I am an ambassador in chains..." (6:19,20).  
   
 When we come to consider 'the Gospel according to Paul' in the letter to the Ephesians, we find that we have the word 'gospel' in the noun form four times. We have it also, on one or two other occasions, in verb form, as in chapter 2:17 -  
 "...and he came and preached peace to you that were far off..."

You notice the margin says "preached good tidings of peace". Now that is just an English way of juggling with a Greek word. The Greek word is the verb of which 'the gospel' is the noun; and, as I have tried to point out before, what it really says - it cannot be translated literally into English - is: "came and 'good-tidinged' or 'goodnewsed' peace". That is impossible in English, but it is just the verb of the noun 'gospel'. It occurs again in chapter 3, verse 8 "...to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ..." - that is, "to good-news unto the Gentiles", "to proclaim unto the Gentiles the good tidings of...". It is the verb again for 'gospel'. I think that gives us ground for saying that this letter is about the gospel.

Many people have the idea that when you reach the letter to the Ephesians you have left the gospel behind, you are further on than the gospel, you must really now have got a long way beyond the gospel. I do not think we can get further than this letter, so far as Divine revelation is concerned: as we shall see, it takes us a very long way indeed in Divine things; but it is still the gospel. The gospel is something very vast, very comprehensive, very far-reaching indeed.

A Letter of Superlatives

This leads us to note that the letter to the Ephesians is the letter of superlatives. An expressive adjective has come into vogue of recent years, by which people try to convey the idea that a thing is very great, or of the highest quality. They say it is 'super'. Now here, in this letter, everything is - may I use the word? - 'super'! The whole letter is written in terms of what is superlative; and I must take it for granted that you can recall something of what is here. Superlatives relate to almost everything in this letter.

There is the superlative of time. Time is altogether transcended: we are taken into the realm of timelessness. By this letter we are taken back into eternity past, before the foundation of the world, and on into eternity to come, unto the ages of the ages. It is the superlative of time - transcending time.

There is the superlative of space. One phrase runs through this letter - "in the heavenlies". When you come into the heavenlies, you are just amazed at the immensity of the expanse. In the natural realm that is true, is it not, even of the very limited 'earthly heavens', as represented by the earth's atmosphere. If you travel a good deal by air, you pass through the airports and see the planes coming and going, coming and going, every few minutes, all day long and all night long and day after day - and yet when you get up into the air you rarely meet another machine. It is quite an event to pass another plane in the air, so vast are the heavens in their expanse. And this letter is written in the realm of the superlatives of space, in the spiritual heavenlies, altogether above the limitations of earth.

Again, it is written in terms of the superlative of power. There is one clause here, so familiar to us, which touches that: "the exceeding greatness of his power to us-ward who believe" (Eph. 1:19). There is much about that power, superlative power, and its operation, in this letter.

Further, this letter is the letter of the superlative in content. How to approach and explain that is exceedingly difficult. You see, some of us have been speaking, giving talks, giving addresses, about this letter to the Ephesians - and it is only a little letter so far as actual chapters or words are concerned - for over forty years, and we have not got near it yet. I defy you to exhaust the content of this letter. It does not matter how long you go on with it - you will always feel, 'I have not begun to approach that yet'. I know what some of you think about me over this letter. I am almost afraid to mention the very name 'Ephesians'! Even as I have once again meditated over this letter at the present time, I have been saying to myself: 'I would like to start now to give a long, long series of messages on the letter to the Ephesians, and I should not touch much of the old ground!' It is like that. But when you look into it and consider it, you find that you are in the realm of superlatives so far as contents are concerned, and it begins with "hath blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ" (1:3). Can you get above or outside that? You cannot!

Again, it is in the realm of the super-mundane. The earth here becomes a very small thing, and all that goes on in it. All its history and all that is here becomes very small indeed. The earth is completely transcended.

It is super-racial, as we shall see in a moment. It is not just dealing with one race or two races. It is all one race here.

It is super-natural. Look again, and you find that everything here is on a plane that is altogether above the natural. You cannot naturally grasp it, comprehend it, explain it. It is Divine revelation. It is by "the Spirit of wisdom and revelation". That is super-natural. The knowledge that is here is super-naturally obtained.

And what more shall I say about the 'super'? The list could very easily be extended. Have I said enough? Can I go on pointing out in what a realm this is, what a range? You see, you have some very great words here. I give you three of them.

"Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, was this grace given, to preach unto the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ" (3:8).

This letter is written in terms of the unsearchable, the untraceable.

"...and to know the love of Christ which passeth knowledge, that ye may be filled unto all the fulness of God" (3:19).

"The knowledge-surpassing love of Christ". Here we have the incomprehensible.

"Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that worketh in us..." (3:20.

Here it is the transcendental. These are big words, but you need big words throughout for this letter, and I am seeking to make an impression upon you.

The Greatest Crisis in Religious History

Now, let us come more to the inward side of this. This letter, in its content, represents perhaps the greatest crisis in religious history. That is saying a great deal. There have been many crises in religious history, and very big ones, but this letter represents the greatest of them all. Before the Lord Jesus was raised from the dead and went to Heaven, and the Holy Spirit came on the day of Pentecost, there were only two classes of people on the earth. The whole of the human race was divided into two classes of people, the Gentiles and the Jews. When the Holy Spirit came, a third class came into being which, from God's standpoint, is neither Gentile nor Jew: it is the Church of God. They are taken out of nations of Gentiles and taken out from among the Jews, but, so far as God is concerned, they are neither Jew nor Gentile, or as Paul puts it, "neither Jew nor Greek" (Gal. 3:28). 'Greek' was a representative word comprehending the Gentiles. When the Lord Jesus comes again, as He is coming, and takes the Church away, the two others will remain here. There will be a reversion in the earth to what was before. The whole world will be divided again into Gentiles and Jews.

So this that came into being on the day of Pentecost, this third and spiritually quite separate class of people called the Church, represents the greatest of all crises in human history for this reason, and in this way - that that Church is not something just of earthly history. The Apostle makes it perfectly clear, right at the beginning of this Ephesian letter, that this Church had its existence in the foreknowledge of God before the world was. This Church is a super-temporal thing, transcending all time and transcending the earth. This Church, the Apostle makes clear, will be there in the ages of the ages, still super-temporal, super-earthly, when Jews and Gentiles go on. Yes, there will be saved nations in the earth: but this other goes on in a relationship which is altogether outside of this world and outside of time; and it is concerning this particular class, this people, this Church, that all these things are said in this letter. It is this Church which takes the character of all these superlatives. This is itself something superlative, this is the supreme thing in the economy of God, this is the supreme thing in all God's sovereign activities from eternity to eternity. We live in the dispensation of something absolutely transcendent - God taking out of the nations, both Jew and Gentile, this people called the Church, which is "the body of Christ".

A Superlative Vessel and a Superlative Calling

Now this superlative vessel or instrument or people has a superlative or transcendent calling. The Jews had an earthly calling to serve an earthly purpose, a vocation of time on this earth. Many believe very strongly that they are yet to serve such a purpose. There are others, and amongst them outstanding Bible teachers, who believe that the day of the Jew is finished as in the economy of God, and that everything has been transferred to the Church now because of the Jew's failure. I am not going to argue that; that does not come into our consideration at all. The fact remains that the Jews were raised up to serve an earthly and temporal purpose in the economy of God. But this Church, eternally saved - eternally chosen, as the Apostle says, in Christ Jesus before the world was - this has a superlative calling to serve the purposes of God in Heaven. It is something timeless, superlative in calling, in vocation. It is a tremendous thing that is here.

We have often put it in this way, and indeed it is what the letter to the Ephesians teaches - we have to touch on this in another way presently - that this world, as to its conduct, is influenced by a whole spiritual hierarchy. Even men who have not a great deal of spiritual discernment, men whom we would hardly think of as Christian men, in the essential sense of being born-again children of God, have recognised this and admit it: that behind the behaviour of this world there is some sinister force, some evil power, some wicked intelligence. They may hesitate to name it, to call it Satan, the Devil, and so on, but the Bible just calls it that. Behind the course of this world's history, as we know it - behind the wars, the rivalries, the hatred, the bitterness, the cruelty, all the clash and clamour of interests, and everything else - there is an evil intelligence, a power at work, a whole system that is seeking to ruin the glory of God in His creation. And that whole system is here said to be in what is called "the heavenlies", that is, something above the earth; in the very air, if you like, in the very atmosphere. Sometimes you can sense it: sometimes you can almost 'cut the atmosphere with a knife', as we say; sometimes you know there is something in the very air that is wicked, evil. You cannot just put it down to people; there is something behind the people, something about. It is very real - sometimes it seems almost tangible, you can almost smell it - something evil and wicked. It is that which is governing this world system and order.

Now what is here in this letter is this, that this Church, eternally conceived, foreknown, chosen, and brought into existence in its beginnings on the day of Pentecost, and growing spiritually through the centuries since - this Church is to take the place of that evil government above this earth. It is to depose it and cast it out of its domain, and itself take that place to be the influence that governs this world in the ages to come. That is the teaching here: a superlative calling, a superlative vocation, because of a superlative people in their very nature. There is something different about them from other people. That is the secret of the true Christian life - of the true ones in Christ: there is something about them that is different. To this world, Christians are a problem and a conundrum. You cannot put them into any earthly class. You cannot just pigeon-hole a Christian. Somehow or other, they elude you all the time. You cannot make them out.

Now, in this letter Paul speaks first of all of that superlative calling, and then he says that, because of the greatness of that calling, this Church must behave itself accordingly. "I... beseech you to walk worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called" (Eph. 4:1). Conduct has to be adjusted to calling. Oh, that Christian people behaved correspondingly to their calling - to their great, eternal, heavenly vocation! But because of this calling, this destiny, this vocation, this position, that mighty evil hierarchy is set to its last ounce to destroy this vessel called the Church, and therefore there is an immense and terrible conflict going on in the air over this thing, and Christians meet it. The more you seek to live according to your calling, the more you realise how difficult it is, and what there is set against you. It is fierce and bitter spiritual conflict.

Superlative Resources

Now, mark you, this is what Paul calls the gospel - all this is the gospel! Did you ever get an idea of the gospel like that? did you ever think of the gospel in such terms? Yes, it is still the gospel, the same gospel; not another, the same. Now, because all this is true as to the gospel, surely the demands are very great. The reaction of so many, when you say things like this, is: 'Oh, I cannot rise to that - that is altogether beyond me, that is too much for me, that is overpowering, that is overwhelming! Give me the simple gospel!' But I wonder if we realise what we involve ourselves in when we talk like that. For it is just there that the true nature of the gospel comes in, in this whole letter. Yes, the calling is great, is immense; the conduct must be on a high level; the conflict is fierce and bitter. And that makes tremendous demands. If that is the gospel, then how shall we stand up to it, how shall we face it, how shall we rise to it, how shall we get through?

Well, we come back to the phrase to which I am gathering the whole of this letter. It is here: "to 'goodnews' the unsearchable riches of Christ". It is translated 'preach' in our Bibles, but it is the same word, as you know, in the verb form. "To 'good-news' the unsearchable riches of Christ". The good news is that the riches are unsearchable! Oh, this is something for us in which to rejoice, being hard pressed, hard put to it; feeling we shall never rise to it, never go through with it. The superlative riches are for a superlative vocation and for a superlative conflict and for superlative conduct.

"Unsearchable riches". Now that is a characteristic word that you find scattered through this letter. Riches! Riches! In chapter 1, verse 7, it is "the riches of his grace". That phrase is enlarged in 2:7 - "the exceeding riches of his grace". And then in 1:18 it is the inheritance - "the riches of the glory of his inheritance in the saints". That just means that the saints are the inheritance of Jesus Christ, and in them, in His Church, He has a tremendous wealth. Now, if He is going to have wealth in this Church, it is He who must supply the wealth, and it is "according to the riches of his grace" that He will find "the riches of his inheritance" in the Church. There is much more said about that. In 3:16 the word is used again - "the riches of his glory". Riches! Riches! Very well: if the demands are great, there is a great supply. If the need is superlative, the resources are superlative. All this sets forth and indicates the basis and the resources of the Church for its calling, for its conduct, and for its conflict.

So what is 'the gospel according to Paul' in the letter to the Ephesians? It is the gospel of the "unsearchable riches" for superlative demands, and when you have said that, you are left swimming in a mighty ocean. Go to the letter again, read it carefully through, note it. Yes, there is a high standard here, there are big demands here, tremendous things in view here; but there are also the riches of His grace, the unsearchable riches of His grace for it all. There are the riches of His glory: it is put like this - "according to the riches of his glory". Now, if you can explore, fathom, exhaust, God's riches in glory, then you put a certain limit upon possibilities and potentialities. But if, after you have said all that you have tried to say in human language, as the Apostle did here, you find that you have not got enough superlatives at your command when you are talking about the resources that are in God by Christ Jesus, then everything is possible - according to the riches of His grace and of His glory.

That is a gospel, is it not? Surely that is good tidings, that is good news! And, dear friends, we shall get through - and we ought not just to scrape through. If it is like that, we ought to get through superlatively. The Lord bring us into the good of the superlatives of the gospel, of the good news.

Chapter 5 - In His Letter to the Philippians

Continuing our enquiry into what the Apostle meant by his words "the gospel which I preach", we take in our hands the little letter written by Paul to the Philippians. Although this was one of the last writings of the Apostle - it was written from his imprisonment in Rome shortly before his execution, at the end of a long, full life of ministry and work - we find that he is still speaking of everything as 'the gospel'. He has not grown out of the gospel, he has not got beyond the gospel. Indeed, at the end he is more than ever aware of the riches of the gospel which are far beyond him.

Here are the references that he makes in this letter to the gospel.

"I thank my God... for your fellowship in furtherance of the gospel..." (Phil. 1:3,5).

"...it is right for me to be thus minded on behalf of you all, because I have you in my heart, inasmuch as, both in my bonds and in the defence and confirmation of the gospel, ye all are partakers with me of grace" (1:7).

"...the one [Preach Christ] of love, knowing that I am set for the defence of the gospel: but the other proclaim Christ of faction, not sincerely, thinking to raise up affliction for me in my bonds. What then? only that in every way, whether in pretence or in truth, Christ is proclaimed; and therein I rejoice, yea, and will rejoice" (1:16-18).

"But ye know the proof of him, that, as a child serveth a father, so he served with me in furtherance of the gospel" (2:22).

"Yea, I beseech thee also, true yokefellow, help these women, for they laboured with me in the gospel..." (4:3).

"I can do all things in him that strengtheneth me. Howbeit ye did well, that ye had fellowship with me in my affliction. And ye yourselves also know, ye Philippians, that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church had fellowship with me in the matter of giving and receiving, but ye only..." (4:13-15).

You see there is a good deal about the gospel in this little letter. I say 'little' letter. This letter is like a beautiful jewel in the crown of Jesus Christ, or like a beautiful pearl whose colours are the result of exquisite pain and suffering. It is something very costly and very precious. So far as actual chapters and verses are concerned, it is small. It is one of the smallest of Paul's letters, but in its intrinsic values and worth it is immense; and as a real setting forth of what the gospel is, there are few, if any, things in the New Testament to be compared with it. What we really come to in this letter is not only a setting forth of what the gospel is in truth, but an example of what the gospel is in effect. Look at it again, dwell upon it with openness of heart, and I think your verdict will be - it surely should be - 'Well, if that is the gospel, give me the gospel! If that is the gospel, it is something worth having!' That surely is the effect of reading this little letter. It is a wonderful example of the gospel in expression.

The Letter of the Joy of Triumph

But as we read it, we find that it resolves itself into this. It is, perhaps more than any other letter in the New Testament, the letter of the joy of triumph. Joy runs right through this letter. The Apostle is full of joy to overflowing. He seems to be hardly able to contain himself. In the last chapter we were speaking of his superlatives in relation to the great calling of the Church in the gospel. Here the Apostle is finding it difficult to express himself as to his joy. I leave you to look at it. Look just at the first words, his introduction, and see. But it runs right through to the end. It has been called the letter of Paul's joy in Christ, but it is the joy of triumph, and triumph in a threefold direction. The triumph of Christ; triumph in Paul; and triumph in the Christians at Philippi. That really sums up the whole letter: the threefold triumph with its joy and exultant outflowing.

The Triumph of Christ

First of all, triumph in Christ and of Christ. It is in this letter that Paul gives us that matchless unveiling of the great cycle of redemption - the sublime course taken by the Lord Jesus in His redemptive work. We see Him, firstly, in the place of equality with God: equal with God, and all that that means - all that it means for God to be God. How great that is! - how full, how high, how majestic, how glorious! Paul here says that Jesus was there equal with God. And then, 'counting it not something to be held on to, to be grasped at, this equality with God, He emptied Himself'. He emptied Himself of all that, let it go, laid it aside, gave it up. Just think of what He was going to have in exchange. These are thoughts almost impossible of grasping: God, in all His infinite fulness of power and majesty of might, in His dominion of glory and eternal fulness, allowing men of His own creation, even the meanest of them, to spit on Him, to mock and jeer at Him. He laid it aside; He emptied Himself, and took upon Him the form of a man, was found in fashion as a man; and not only that, but still lower in this cycle - the form of a bond-slave, a bond-slave man. A bond-slave is one who has no personal rights; he has no franchise, he has no title. He is not allowed to choose for himself, to go his own way, and much more. Paul says here that Jesus took the form of a bond-slave.

And then he goes on to say that 'He humbled Himself, became obedient unto death': and not a glorious death at that, not a death about which people speak in terms of praise and admiration. 'Yes', says the Apostle, 'death on a cross' - the most shameful, ignominious death, with all that that meant. You see, the Jewish world, the religious world, of that day, had it written in their Book that he that hangs upon a tree is cursed of God. Jesus was obedient to the point of being found in the place of one who is cursed of God. That is how they looked upon Him - as cursed of God. And as for the rest of the world, the Gentile world, their whole conception of that which should be worshipped was one who could never be defeated, one who could never be found in a situation which should cause him shame, one who could stand before the world as a success - that was their idea of a god. But here is this Man on the Cross. Is He a success? That is no sign of success. That is no indication of human strength. That is weakness. There is nothing honourable about that - it is disgraceful. That is humanity at its lowest.

And then the cycle is reversed, and the Apostle breaks in here, and says: "Wherefore also God highly exalted him, and gave unto him the name which is above every name; that in the name of Jesus every knee shall bow" - sooner or later; either gladly to acknowledge Him Lord, or forcedly to do so; sooner or later, in the determinate counsels of Almighty God, it shall be; "and every tongue shall confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father". What a cycle! What a circle! What a triumph! You cannot find triumph fuller or greater than that: and Paul calls that the gospel. It is the good news of Christ's tremendous triumph. He has triumphed in that circle, and all that is included in the triumph is the gospel. We cannot stay to dwell upon it, as to why He did it, or what He effected by it, what He has secured in it. All that is the gospel. But the fact is that in that way Christ has accomplished a tremendous victory. In the whole circle of Heaven and earth, from the highest height to the lowest depth, He has triumphed. Paul finds unspeakable joy in contemplating that. That is what he calls the good tidings, the gospel - triumph in Christ.

Triumph in Paul's Own Spiritual History

Paul then comes in himself, and gives us in this letter quite a bit of autobiography. He tells us something of his own history before his conversion, as to who he was and what he was, and where he was, and what he had. Of course, it was nothing to be compared with what his Lord had had and had let go. But Paul himself, as Saul of Tarsus, had a great deal by birth, by inheritance, by upbringing, by education, by status, prestige and so on. He had quite a lot. He tells us about it here. All that men would boast of - he had it. And then he met Jesus Christ, or Jesus Christ met him; and the whole thing, he said - all that he had and possessed - became in his hands like ashes, like refuse! "I do count them but refuse".

Many people have this false idea about the gospel, that, if you embrace the gospel, if you become a Christian, if you are converted, or however you like to put it, you are going to have to lose or give up everything, you have to give up this and you have to give up something else. If you become a Christian, it will be just one long story of giving up, giving up, giving up, until sooner or later you are skinned of everything. Listen! Here is a man who had far more than you or I ever had. We cannot stand in the same street with this man in his natural life, in all that he was and all that he had, and all the prospects that were before him as a young man. There is very little doubt that, if Paul had not become a Christian, his name would have gone down in history amongst some other very famous names of his time. But he says - not in these words, but in many more words than these: 'When I met the Lord Jesus, that whole thing became to me like refuse.' Give it up? Who will find any sacrifice in giving up a candle when they have found the sun? Sacrifice in that? Oh, no! 'In comparison with Christ, I just count it the veriest refuse'.

What a victory! What a triumph! You see, this giving up - well, put it like that, if you like - but Paul is very happy about it. That is the point. It is Paul's joy, the joy of a tremendous victory in himself.

Triumph in Paul's Ministry

But further, here it is the story of the great victory in his ministry, in his work. We recall the story of how he went to Philippi. He had set out to go into Asia, to preach the gospel there, and was on his way, when, in that mysterious providence of God which only explains itself afterward and never before, he was forbidden, checked, prevented, stopped. The day closed with a closed way, a halted journey. He was in perplexity as to the meaning of this; he did not understand it. Waiting on God during that night, he had a vision. He saw a man of Macedonia - Philippi is in Macedonia - saying: "Come over into Macedonia, and help us" (Acts 16:9). And Paul said, "We sought to go forth... concluding that God had called us for to preach the gospel unto them". So, turning away from Asia, he turned towards Europe, and came to Philippi.

Sometimes disappointment and upsetting of plans can be the very ground of a great victory. God can get a lot by putting aside our cherished plans, and upsetting everything for us. - But we continue. Paul came to Philippi. And the Devil knew that he had come, and got to work and said, in effect, 'Not if I can prevent it, Paul! I will make this place too hot for you to stay here!' And he got to work, and before long Paul with his companions were found in the inner dungeon of the prison, their feet made fast, chains upon them, bleeding from the lashing that they had received. Well, this does not seem to say much for Divine guidance! Where is the victory in this? But wait. The very jailor and his household were saved that night. They came to the Lord and were baptized. And when, years afterwards, in this other prison in Rome, Paul wrote this letter to the saints he had left in Philippi, he put in a phrase like this: "my brethren beloved and longed for" (Phil. 4:1). I like to think that the jailor and his family were included in this. "Brethren beloved and longed for". And in the same letter he says: "I would have you know, brethren, that the things which happened unto me have fallen out rather unto the progress of the gospel" (1:12). It is a picture of triumph, is it not? - the triumph in his life and in his ministry.

Triumph in Paul's Sufferings

And he triumphed in his sufferings. He says something about his sufferings in this very letter, the sufferings which were upon him as he wrote; but it is all in a note and spirit of real triumph. He says: "As always, so now also Christ shall be magnified in my body, whether by life, or by death" (1:20). No tinge of despair about that, is there? 'Even now, as it has always been, Christ must be magnified in my body, whether by life or by death.' That is triumph. Yes, that is triumph, that is joy.

But more: he said, 'Christ manifested in my bonds'. A wonderful thing, this! Brought to Rome, chained to a Roman guardian soldier, never allowed more than a certain measure of liberty - and yet you cannot silence this man! He has got something that 'will out' all the time, and he says it has gone throughout the whole Praetorian guard (1:13). If you knew something about the Praetorian guard, you would say, 'That is triumph!' In the very headquarters of Caesar, and a Caesar such as he was, the gospel is triumphant. It is being spoken about throughout the whole Praetorian guard! Yes, there is triumph in his sufferings, in his bonds, in his afflictions. This is not just words. It is a glorious triumph; and this is the gospel in action, the gospel in expression.

Triumph in the Philippian Christians

And this triumph was not only in Christ and in Paul, but in the Philippians. It is a beautiful letter of the triumph of Divine grace in these Philippians. You can see it, firstly, in their response; and you really need to know something about Philippi in those days. You get just a little idea from what happened to Paul. You know about the pagan temple with its terrible system of women slaves, and all that is bound up with that horrible thing. As Paul and his companions went through the streets of Philippi, one of these young women, described as having a spirit of Python, a soothsaying demon, a veritable possession of Satan, persistently followed and cried out after them.

That is the sort of city that Philippi was, and Paul finds it possible to write a letter of this kind to believers in a city like that. Is that not triumph? I think that there should ever be a church in Philippi at all is something, but a church like this is something more. And it is not only in their response to the gospel, which cost them so much. Look again at the letter, and see the mutual love which they had one for another. This is indeed a jewel in the crown of Jesus Christ. This letter has been called Paul's great love letter. The whole thing overflows with love, and it is because of the love which they had one for another. Love of this kind is not natural. This is the work of Divine grace in human hearts. It speaks of a great triumph. If there is anything to add, we may recall that, when Paul was in need, it was these people who thought about his need and sent for his help and his succour. They are concerned for the man to whom they owed so much for the gospel.

Well, all that constitutes this tremendous triumph. It is a letter of triumph, is it not? We have proved our point, I think. I repeat: This is the gospel! But Paul says that these people at Philippi, these believers, are exemplary - they are an example; and so what we have to do at the end of this review is to ask: 'Just what is the gospel so far as this letter is concerned? What is the good news here, the good tidings? How can this kind of thing be repeated or reproduced?'

The Secret of the Triumph

We are not dealing with people of peculiar virtues, a specially fine type of person. It is just man, poor, frail humanity: out of that can such a thing be repeated, reproduced? Can we hope for anything like this now? It would be good news if it could be proved to us that there is a way of reproducing this situation today, would it not? Knowing what we do know, it would be good tidings if it could be shown to us that this is not merely something which relates to an isolated company of people who lived long centuries ago, but that it can be true today - that this gospel, this good news, is for us.

How, then? Is there in this letter a key phrase? We have sought in our studies in these letters to gather everything into some characteristic phrase from each. Is there such a phrase in this letter that gives us the key to it all, the key to entering ourselves into Christ's great victory and all the value of it? Can we find the key to open the door for us into the position that the Apostle occupied - that everything that this world can offer and that might be placed at our disposal is tawdry, is petty, is insignificant, in comparison with Christ? Is there a key which will open the door for us into what these Philippians had come into?

I think there is, and I think you find it in the first chapter, in the first clause of verse 21: "For to me to live is Christ". That is the good news of the all-captivating Christ. When Christ really captivates, everything happens and anything can happen. That is how it was with Paul and with these people. Christ had just captivated them. They had no other thought in life than Christ. They may have had their businesses, their trades, their professions, their different walks of life and occupations in the world, but they had one all-dominating thought, concern and interest - Christ. Christ rested, for them, upon everything. There is no other word for it. He just captivated them.

And I see, dear friends, that that - simple as it may sound - explains everything. It explains Paul, it explains this church, it explains these believers, it explains their mutual love. It solved all their problems, cleared up all their difficulties. Oh, this is what we need! If only you and I were like this, if we really after all were captivated by Christ! I cannot convey that to you, but as I have looked at that truth - looked at it, read it, thought about it - I have felt something moved in me, something inexplicable. After all, nine-tenths of all our troubles can be traced to the fact that we have other personal interests influencing us, governing us and controlling us - other aspects of life than Christ. If only it could be true that Christ had captured and captivated and mastered us, and become - yes, I will use the word - an obsession, a glorious obsession! I think this is what the writer of the hymn meant when he wrote: 'Jesus, Lover of my soul', and when further on he says: 'More than all in Thee I find'. When it is like that, we are filled with joy. There are no regrets at having to 'give up' things. We are filled with joy, filled with victory. There is no spirit of defeatism at all. It is the joy of a great triumph. It is the triumph of Christ over the life. Yes, it has been, and because it has been, it can be again.

But this needs something more than just a kind of mental appraisement. We can so easily miss the point. We may admire the words, the ideas; we may fall to it as a beautiful presentation; but, oh, we need the captivating to wipe out our selves - our reputations, everything that is associated with us and our own glory - that the One who captivates may be the only One in view, the only One with a reputation, and we at His feet. This is the gospel, the good news - that when Christ really captivates, the kind of thing that is in this letter happens, it really happens. Shall we ask the Lord for that life captivation of His beloved Son?

Chapter 6 - In His Letter to the Colossians

As we come to this letter to the Colossians, by way of laying a foundation we will read some verses from the matchless first chapter.

"For this cause we also, since the day we heard it, do not cease to pray and make request for you, that ye may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to walk worthily of the Lord unto all pleasing, bearing fruit in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God; strengthened with all power, according to the might of his glory, unto all patience and longsuffering with joy; giving thanks unto the Father, who made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light; who delivered us out of the power of darkness, and translated us into the kingdom of the Son of his love; in whom we have our redemption, the forgiveness of our sins: who is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him were all things created, in the heavens and upon the earth, things visible and things invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers; all things have been created through him, and unto him; and he is before all things, and in him all things consist. And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning;, the firstborn from the dead; that in all things he might have the preeminence. For it was the good pleasure of the Father that in him should all the fulness dwell; and through him to reconcile all things unto himself, having made peace through the blood of his cross; through him, I say, whether things upon the earth, or things in the heavens" (Col. 1:9-20).

Now, that forms quite a good foundation for speaking about the gospel - and do note that that is the gospel. All that is what Paul calls the 'good news'. It is the thing that Paul preached - "the gospel which I preach". In this letter, that word occurs not so many times as in other letters, but with a peculiar point. It occurs in this first chapter, verse 5: "...because of the hope which is laid up for you in the heavens, whereof ye heard before in the word of the truth of the gospel"; and then in verse 23: "...if so be that ye continue in the faith, grounded and stedfast, and not moved away from the hope of the gospel which ye heard, which was" - and here is the same word in the verb form - "preached in all creation under heaven" - "which was 'gospelled', ' good newsed', in all creation under heaven".

Good Tidings in an Emergency Situation

Now, if anything is to be good news, or good tidings, if it is to have a really keen edge to it, there must be a situation for which it brings relief, assurance, comfort or gratification. If it does not matter, then it is not good news. For example, supposing someone, with whom your life and heart are closely bound up, lies in a very serious and critical illness, and you call in medical help. You are under a great burden of anxiety: it matters very much to you which way it goes; and you wait for what seems an eternity for the doctor to come down and give you a report. When he comes down and says, 'It is all right, you need not worry; things are going all right, they will come through', that is good news indeed. It has an edge on it, because your heart is bound up with this matter. If there is a great decision in the balances, which is going to affect in some way your future, your career, your life, and a committee is sitting on it, and you are waiting outside with your heart, as we say, in your mouth, feeling most anxious as to how it is going: when someone comes out and says, 'All right, you have got the job, the appointment', that is good news. It brings to you an immense sense of relief. If there is a battle on, the issue of which will be serious for all concerned, and someone comes back from the scene of the fighting, and says 'It is going well, it is all right, we are going to get through!' - why, it is a tremendous relief. That is good tidings. It touches us, it means something to us. There has to be something in the nature of an emergency situation really to give point to good news.

The Emergency Situation at Colossae

Now, in the case of almost all Paul's letters, there was an emergency situation. Something had arisen in the nature of a threat to the Christian life of those with whom his heart was closely bound up; something had arisen which was causing many of those Christians real concern, worry and anxiety. They were in real difficulty; the future seemed to be in doubt. It was in order to meet such emergencies as these that Paul wrote his letters, and in them all he uses this word 'gospel', or 'good news' - good news for an emergency, good tidings for this critical situation.

In this letter to the Colossians it is peculiarly so. There was a real emergency on amongst the believers at Colossae. But it was the same emergency which takes different forms at different times - it is present today in its own form. What it amounted to was this: that there were certain people, considering themselves to be very knowledgeable, wise, intelligent, learned people, who had been dipping into a lot of mysterious stuff, and they were bringing their high-sounding ideas and theories to bear upon these Christians. It all had to do with the great magnitudes of life.

First of all, there was no less a matter in view than the very meaning of the created universe. Now that might be, of course, a realm for philosophical speculation; but you know that, in certain ways, that comes very near to the Christian heart. Is there a design for everything, or is everything either just taking a mechanical course, or being carried on by some mysterious powers which are inimical to human well-being? Is there any real design behind this created universe? To push that one step further: Is there a purpose in everything? Sooner or later, Christians come up against these questions. Under duress, trial, pressure and suffering, sometimes we do not know what to make of things. This seems to be a topsy-turvy universe, full of enigmas and contradictions and paradoxes, and we have a bad time over it. Is there a plan in it - is there really a Divine control of everything in this universe, in human history and in all that is happening? Is there after all, to use a word which I do not think we fully appreciate, a Providence for everything and in everything? - that is to say, is everything being made to work together according to design and purpose, and to work out toward a great, Divine, beneficent end?

Now, these people were arguing about that, and the Christians at Colossae were being greatly disturbed by it all.

And then it came nearer to their own Christian existence. It touched upon their very life as children of God. Now, if any people in the world ought to be quite sure about these matters - that there is a Divine purpose and Divine pattern and Divine Providence - it is Christians, and the very life of the Christian is affected by whether this is so or not. The matter of our assurance, our confidence, our restfulness, our power, our testimony, rests upon having an answer to these questions. The meaning of this whole universe, the order and the purpose in it, the design and the control of it, the Providence over all events and happenings in the course of human history - these are things that come very near to the Christian. If we have any doubt about them, our Christianity goes for nothing, the very foundations are swept from under our feet, we do not know where we are.

That was the emergency at Colossae. The very life of the Christians, the very life of the Church, was threatened. And if its life is threatened, its growth is threatened. The whole matter of the spiritual growth of the Church and of the Christians is at stake in this - growth, development and maturity. If that is threatened, then something else will be threatened: the whole thing will disintegrate, will fall apart; its unity and cohesion will collapse; the whole thing will be scattered into fragments. And so the very hope of the Church and of the Christian is struck at, their hope and their destiny. These are neither small nor unpractical matters. They may come very near at some time or other, and they require an answer.

The Answer to the Situation

Now, it was to meet this whole situation, to answer all these serious questions and issues, that Paul wrote this letter: to confirm the Christians, to establish them, to sustain them, to encourage them; and he calls it 'good tidings', and it is. If you can give something to answer all that, it is indeed good tidings, is it not? That is 'gospel' indeed! You see, the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ touches the uttermost bounds of this universe, and covers everything within those bounds, including human history, human happenings, world events, the course of things, the design in things, the end of things. The gospel touches it all at every point.

So Paul answers it, and he answers the whole of it in one word. His answer is: Christ. Christ is the answer. That answer is found inclusively in those words in chapter 3, verse 11, the last clause: "Christ is all, and in all." And what an immense 'all' Christ is if He covers the whole of that ground! If He reaches out and embraces all those mighty issues, what a Christ He is! The all-comprehending fact is emphatically and categorically stated by the Apostle in this letter. He states it in many sentences, but in this one statement he gathers it all up. The answer to all this is Christ. Christ is the explanation of all the happenings in human history. Christ explains this universe, Christ gives character to this universe, Christ stands behind all the course of the events in this universe. Christ is the integrating Person of everything, the One in whom all things hold together.

'Christ is the end, for Christ was the beginning;  
 Christ the beginning, for the end is Christ.'

The Evidence That the Answer is Satisfactory

But perhaps you may say, 'It is all very well for Paul to make a categorical statement like that, but what is the evidence?' Well, the evidence is quite real. And it must be said that, if we are asking for the evidence, something has gone wrong with us! We ought to be the answer, we ought to be the evidence: because the witness to this is first of all the personal, spiritual experience of the child of God. You can leave the vast universe for the moment, if you like, and come to the little universe of your own life - for, after all, what is true in the microcosm is only a reflection of what is true in the great cosmic realm. God brings down His evidence from the circumferential to the very centre of the individual Christian life, and the answer is there. What is the experience of a truly born-again child of God?

Now you can test whether you are born again by this, and, thank God, I know that many of you will be able to say, 'Yes, that is true to my experience'. But I ask you: What is your experience as a truly born-again child of God? When you really came to the Lord Jesus - however you may put it: when you let Jesus come into your heart or into your life, or when you handed over your life to Him; when there was a transaction with Him, a new birth, by which you became a child of God - not by any 'sacrament' applied to you, but by the inward operation of His Spirit: when you became a child of God in a living, conscious way, what was the first consciousness that came to you, and has remained with you ever since?

Was it not, and is it not, this: 'There is now a purpose in life, of which I never knew before; there is a purpose in things. Now I have the sense - indeed I know - that I was not just born into this world and grew up, but there was a purpose behind it.' There is design in things; a sense - you may not be able to explain it all, what it all means - but you have the sense now that you have arrived at, or at least begun to realise, the very purpose of your existence. Is that true? When the Lord Jesus at last has His place in our hearts, the big question of life is answered - the big question as to the 'Why' of our existence. Till then, you wander about, you do all sorts of things, you fill up time, you employ heart and mind and hand, but you do not know what it is all for. You may have a very full life, a very full life indeed, outside of Christ, and yet come to the end without being able to answer the question, What is it all about?

One man, who had enjoyed such a full life, who had become well-known in the schools of learning, a great figure in the intellectual realm, in his dying moment cried: 'I am taking an awful leap into the dark'. He had no answer to the question. But the simple child of God, immediately they come to the Lord, has the answer in consciousness, if not in explanation, in his or her heart, and that is what is called 'rest'. "Come unto me", said Jesus, "and I will give you rest" (Matt. 11:28). Rest is in this: 'Well, I have been a wanderer, but now I have come home; I have been searching - I have found; I have been in quest of something - I did not know what it was - but now I have it'. There is purpose in this universe, and when Jesus Christ comes into His place, as this letter says, then you know there is purpose in your universe, and there will be purpose in the universe of everybody else, if only they will come that way.

And not only purpose, but more - control. The child of God very soon begins to realise that he or she has been taken under control, brought under a mastery; that there is a law of government set up in the consciousness, which is directive: which, on the one hand, says, 'Yes', the glorious 'Yes' of many liberties; on the other hand, 'No - careful, steady, watch!' We all know that. We do not hear those words, but we know that that is what is being said to us in our hearts. The Spirit of Christ within is just saying, 'Look to your steps - be careful, be watchful'. We have come under control. That is extended in many ways over the whole life, but it is a great reality. This universe is under control, it is under government. The evidence of it is found within our own experience when Christ comes to His place. And you can extend that into the future ages, when the whole universe will be like that, under Christ's control.

And then again: "in whom all things hold together". The wonderful thing about the Christian life is its integration, or, if you prefer another word, its unification. How scattered, how divided, we were before Christ got His place! We were 'all over the place', as we say - one thing after another, looking this way and looking that; hearts divided, lives divided; we in ourselves divided, a conflict within our own persons. When the Lord Jesus really gets His place as Lord within, the life is unified. We are just gathered up, poised, concentrated upon one thing. We have only one thing in view. What Paul said of himself becomes true: "but one thing I do..." (Phil. 3:13). We are people of "one thing". Christ unifies the life.

What about life itself, the life of the child of God? When the Lord Jesus is in His right place, the life of the child of God is secured, is established, is confirmed, and grows; there is spiritual growth and maturity. It is a wonderful thing. If, in some Christian lives, it is not realised as a fact, it is for very good reasons - or for bad reasons! - but if the Lord Jesus really is "all, and in all", in the life, if He 'in all things has the pre-eminence', it is wonderful to see the spiritual growth. Those who have much association with, or experience in dealing with, young Christians, have found this one of the most impressive things - how, where the Lord Jesus just gets His way, they go ahead spiritually, they grow. They come to understanding and knowledge which so many of the scholars seem to have missed. They have come to a real spiritual understanding. While other people are trying to get on along other lines - intellectually and so on - these young ones, who have not, many of them, the background of intellectual or scholastic training - they are just simple people - are just leaping ahead spiritually.

This growth in spiritual intelligence and understanding does not rest upon anything natural. It is coming about because Jesus has such a large place, and He is the source and centre and sum of all spiritual knowledge. Over against that, it is possible to have great acquisitions and qualifications in the academic realm, to be doing big things in that realm, and yet to find that the simple things of the Lord Jesus Christ are to you as a foreign language. You do not know what it is about - you cannot follow or join in at all. This is sad, but true. There are Christians, yes, true Christians, who just cannot talk about the things of the Lord. If there is to be growth, it can only come about through Jesus being given His place, fully and without question.

And then, as to destiny. The statement is that the destiny of this universe is with the Lord Jesus, and that that destiny is universal glory. But that is just a beautiful idea, an enchanting vista, is it not? How are you going to prove it? In your own heart! Is it not equally true with the other matters that we have already been considering, that, when the Lord Jesus really gets His place, you have a foretaste of that glory? No one can understand the Christian who has not the Christian's experience, but there it is. It is not just that we are making out that we are having a good time. It is something coming from the inside; it is something of a foretaste of the glory that is to be. We have got the answer to all these immense questions right in our own spiritual experience.

The Witness of the Church

But then the Apostle moves to the Church, and speaks about the Church: "And he is the head of... the church... the firstborn from the dead" (Col. 1:18). How does the Church bear witness to the fact, this great fact, that Jesus is the answer to these immense questions? I think the Church gives the answer both positively and negatively.

It gives the answer positively - though not as positively as it might have done - but it does give the answer in this, that, after all (and what an 'all' of these two thousand years!), the Church is still in existence. Think of that inrush of the forces of antagonism and hatred and murder upon the Church in its infancy, with the determination of the greatest empire that the world had ever known to wipe it out. After all, it is that empire that has gone; the Church continues. Think, too, of all that has set itself during the centuries since to bring the Church to an end, to destroy it, and still is set upon that. Oh, that men were not so blind that they misread history! If only those powers in the world today, great kingdoms, great empires, would rightly read history, they would see they are on an utterly vain mission, a fool's errand indeed, to try to destroy the testimony of Jesus on this earth. It is they who will be destroyed.

Yes, the very continuance and persistence of the Church is evidence that this is true - that Jesus Christ is the key to this universe, that He is the answer to all these questions. I say, the Church does not give the answer as clearly as it might. If only it had gone on as it began, what an answer it would be!

But it gives the answer negatively, as well as positively. It answers it negatively by the very fact that, whereas once it stood up to the world victoriously, weathered the storms triumphantly, it has now moved away from its centre, the Lord Jesus Christ, and brought in substitutes for His absolute headship and lordship. It has made other things its governing interests. The result has been disintegration, division, and all the rest. Yes, the thing is answered in the negative, and it will always be like that.

Let us be quite clear: it is not that the truth has broken down. If these things ever become a question with you, it will not be because they are open to question, but because something has gone wrong with you as it has gone wrong with the Church. It is not in the truth, but in that which is supposed to represent the truth, that the question lies. These substitutes for the headship of Jesus Christ, whether they be men or institutions or religious interests or Christian activities, whatever they may be, if they get in the place of the Lord Jesus Himself, lead to nothing but disunity and division. To put that more positively, if only men, leaders and all the rest, would say, 'Look here, all our institutions, our missions, our organizations, all our interests in Christianity, must be subservient to the absolute lordship of Jesus Christ', you would find a unity coming about, a oneness. We should all flow together on that ground. It is the mighty tide of His lordship that will cure it all.

Go down by the sea-shore. The tide is right out, and all the breakwaters are naked, dividing up the whole coastline as it were into sections. But as the tide comes up, the breakwaters, the dividing things, begin to disappear. You come back at full flood-tide, and you see nothing whatever of those dividing breakwaters. The rising tide has buried them all. And when Christ is all, and in all, 'in all things having the pre-eminence', all those things which belong to the low tide of spiritual life, the ebb-tide of spiritual life, will just disappear. The proof is in the Church.

We had a little taste of it during the recent visit to this country of Dr. Graham. There was one consuming passion to bring Christ into His place at the beginnings of life; all the different sections were found concerned with that. Where were the barriers, where were the 'breakwaters', where were the departmental things? They had gone, buried under this high tide of concern that Christ should have His place in lives. Why should that be for three months only? Why should it be experienced only in a convention lasting a few days once a year? No, this position is God's thought for always. The key to it is just this - Christ all in all.

Perhaps we can see now why mention of the gospel in this letter is confined to one emphasis - "the hope of the gospel". Yes, the only occurrences of 'gospel' or 'good news' are in that connection - "the hope of the good news". The hope of the gospel is in Jesus Christ being all and in all. Hope is a Person, not an abstract nature in us - 'being hopeful' - which does not amount to much more than a periodical, variable optimism. Hope here is a Person. The hope of the good news is: He in all things having the pre-eminence. That is where the hope lies for you, for me, for the Church, for the world, for the universe. That is the hope of the gospel.

Chapter 7 - In His Letters to the Thessalonians

"...our gospel came not unto you in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance (1 Thess. 1:5).  
 "...having suffered before, and been shamefully entreated, as ye know, at Philippi, we waxed bold in our God to speak unto you the gospel of God in much conflict" (2:2).  
 "...we have been approved of God to be entrusted with the gospel..." (2:4).  
 "...being affectionately desirous of you, we were well pleased to impart unto you, not the gospel of God only, but also our own souls... For ye remember, brethren, our labour and travail: working night and day, that we might not burden any of you, we preached unto you the gospel of God" (2:8,9).  
 "...we... sent Timothy, our brother and God's minister in the gospel of Christ..." (3:1,2).  
 "...rendering vengeance to them that know not God, and to them that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus..." (2 Thess. 1:8).  
 "...whereunto he called you through our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2:14).

We see that the Gospel has quite a place in these letters. We seek now to discover the real meaning of the gospel, that is, the essential meaning of the good tidings, from the standpoint of these letters and the Thessalonian believers, and we shall be helped to that understanding if we take a look at the spiritual history, life and state of these believers in Thessalonica.

The Thessalonian Christians an Example

You will at a glance see what a special regard Paul had for them. He reputedly uses words such as these: "We give thanks to God always for you all". Both in the first and second letters he speaks like that (1. 1:2; 2. 1:3, 2:13). "We give thanks to God for you". And then he says about them a very wonderful thing, which gives us a definite lead in this consideration. He says in the first letter, chapter 1, verse 7: "Ye became an ensample to all that believe in Macedonia and in Achaia". That is something to say about a company of the Lord's people, and it leads us at once to ask the question - How were they an ensample? It was evidently not only to those immediately referred to, in all Macedonia, and Achaia, for these letters remain unto this day, and they therefore represented that which is an example for all the Lord's people. If that was true of them, then the gospel must have meant something very much where they were concerned. It must have had a very special form of expression in them, and so we seek to answer the question: How were they "an ensample to all that believe"?

A Pure Spirit and a Clean Heart

We find the answer in the first place here in this very first chapter. It was in their realism in reception of the gospel. "Our gospel came unto you not in word only, but also in power, and in the Holy Spirit, and in much assurance". And again: "when ye received from us the word of the message, even the word of God, ye accepted it not as the word of men, but, as it is in truth, the word of God" (2:13). Now that represents a very clean start; and if we are going to come to the place of these Thessalonian believers, if the gospel is to have that expression in us that it had in them, if it is going to be true in our case that we are an example to all them that believe, then it is very important that we have a clean start.

For us, of course, if we have advanced in the Christian life without becoming such exemplary believers, that may mean retracing our steps in order to start again somewhere where we have gone wrong; clearing away a lot of rubbish and starting at a certain point all over again. But I am thinking also of young Christians who have recently made the start. You are really at the beginning, and we are most concerned about you, because you may meet many old Christians who are not by any means an example to all that believe. I am sorry to have to say that, but it is quite true, and we do not want you to be like that. We want you to be exemplary Christians; those of whom the Apostle Paul, if he were present, could say, 'I thank God always for you'. It would be a great thing, would it not, if that could be said of us? 'Thank God for him! Thank God for her! Thank God that ever we came into touch with this one, and that one! I always thank God for them - they are an example of what Christians ought to be!'

Now, that is the desire of the Lord, that is our desire for you, and it should be the desire of our hearts for ourselves. Although we may not have succeeded, let us not give up hope that some may yet give thanks for us, that we may be an example, that in some things, at any rate, it may be true of us as it was of these. Paul says here: "Ye became imitators of us" (1 Thess. 1:6). The Lord help us to be such an example that we could invite others, in some respects at least, to imitate us, without any spiritual pride.

Well, if this is to be so, the start must be a clean one. You see, quite evidently, as these Thessalonians listened to Paul preaching the good tidings, their minds and hearts were free from prejudice. They would not have come to the conclusion to which they did come if there had been any prejudice, if they had already closed down the matter in their minds, or come to a set position. They were open in heart from the outset, ready for whatever was of God, and that created a capacity for discerning what was of God. You will never know whether a thing is of God if you entertain prejudice, if you have already judged it, if already you have come to a fixed position. If you are settled in your mind, closed in your heart, harbour suspicions and fears, you have already sabotaged the work of the Holy Spirit, and you will never know if the thing is of God. You must be open-hearted, open-minded, free from suspicions and prejudices, and ready in this attitude - 'Now, if there is anything of the Lord, anything of God, I am ready for that, no matter through whom it comes, how it comes, where it comes. If it is of God, I am ready for it'. That creates a disposition to which the Holy Spirit can bear witness, and makes things possible for the Lord.

Now, as we shall see, that is exactly how these Thessalonians were. They received the word, yes, in much affliction, but they received it as the Word of God, not as the word of man. Because of their purity of spirit, they had the sense - 'This thing is right, this is of God!' That was a good start. As I said earlier, it may be that some of us will have to get back somewhere to make that start again. To any reading these words, who may be of advanced years in the Christian life, I would say: Dear friend, if you have anywhere on the road become in any way affected, infected, by prejudice and suspicion, you have closed the door to anything further of God. Let us clearly understand that. It is true that -

'The Lord hath yet more light and truth  
 To break forth from His Word'.

We have not yet exhausted all that the Lord has to show us in His Word; but He will only show it to the pure in heart. "The pure in heart... shall see God" (Matt. 5:8).

These Thessalonians, then, had a pure spirit from the start.

Mutuality and Maturity

The next thing that we notice about them, after their realism in reception, was their mutuality and maturity - two things which always go together. In both these letters, that which the Apostle speaks about perhaps more than anything else is the wonderful love between these believers. "The love of each one of you all toward one another aboundeth" (2 Thess. 1:3). He is speaking all the way through about their mutual love. And going alongside of that was their spiritual growth. You see, love always builds up (1 Cor. 8:1). This kind of love, mutual love, always means spiritual increase. We can see how true that is if we view it from the opposite standpoint. Little, personal, petty, selfish, separated, individual Christians, or companies or bodies of Christians who are exclusive and closed, and have not a wide open heart of love to all saints - how small they are, how cramped they are. It is true. And it is in this mutual love one for another, and growing and increasing love one for another, that spiritual growth takes place. Do not forget that. If you are concerned about the spiritual growth of your own heart, your own life, and that of others, it will be along the line of love, mutual love, and you are the one to begin it. Mutuality and maturity always go together.

Suffering and Service

And then, in the third place, you will find that they were characterized by suffering and service, and this is a wonderful Divine combination. It is something that is not natural. The Apostle had much to say about it, as you will see if you underline the word 'suffering' in these letters, and note his references to their sufferings and their afflictions. They "received the word in much affliction" (1 Thess. 1:6). He speaks about their sufferings, and he describes those sufferings. They in Thessalonica were suffering along the same lines and for the same causes as their brethren in Judaea, he said (2:14).

Now, in Judaea, that is, in the country of the Jews, you know how the Christians suffered. Christ Himself suffered at the hands of the Jews; Stephen was martyred at the hands of the Jews; the Church met its first persecutions in Judaea, in Jerusalem, and they were scattered abroad by the persecutions that arose there over Stephen; and Paul says, 'Now you are suffering in that way'. Evidently there was in Thessalonica much persecution, much opposition; threats and all sorts of difficulties - the kind of thing, perhaps, where it was very difficult for them to do business and get jobs, all because the business was in the hands of those who had no room for this Christianity and for these Christians.

But with all that severe suffering, and with all their "much affliction" they did not become introspective. That is the peril of suffering. If you are suffering frustration, opposition, persecution, or if the best jobs are given to someone else, and so on, the natural thing is to turn in upon yourself, to be very sorry for yourself, to begin to nurse your trouble and be wholly occupied with yourself. But here, suffering led to service.

The Apostle says that the Word went forth from them, not only through all the region of Macedonia and Achaia, but throughout the whole country (1:8). Their suffering - what did it do? It made them turn outwards, and say, 'There are others everywhere in need, in suffering, as we: let us see what we can do for them'. That is the way to respond to the gospel, is it not? That speaks of the glorious gospel! The gospel had become to them such good news that it had the effect upon them of delivering them entirely from all self-pity in the deepest affliction. Let us take that to heart.

Patience and Hope

Furthermore the Apostle speaks of their "patience of hope" (1:3), and that simply means that they did not easily give up. That counts for something, you know. You are having a difficult time; everything and everybody is against you. It is so easy to give up - just to give up; to draw out of the race, or drop your hands in the fight, and say, 'It is no use - better give it all up'. But no: these Christians had patience and hope. They did not easily give up, they 'stuck to it', and we shall see that they had a hope that kept them sticking to it.

Such were these who were 'an example to all that believe'. In them we see the constituents of exemplary Christians, and they are the true features of the gospel. You see, the gospel is for Christians in difficulty! It is not only for the unsaved, but for Christians when they are in difficulty or in suffering. It is still good news. If we lose the 'good news' element in the gospel, if it loses for us its keen edge as 'good tidings', we become stale; we come to the place where we 'know it all'. If we lose that sense, then when trouble comes we give up, we let go; but if to have come to a saving knowledge of the Lord Jesus is still for us the greatest thing in all the world and all the universe, then we get through.

Difficulties Because of Temperament

Now, because difficulties always correspond to our dispositions, that is, what we are always gives rise to the nature of our trials, so it was with the Thessalonians. Nothing is a trial to you unless you are made in a certain way. Something that is a trial to you might never be a trial to me at all. Or it might be the other way round. What might be a terrible thing to me and knock me right off my balance, other people could go through quite calmly, and wonder what I am making such a fuss about. Our troubles and our trials very largely take their rise from the way we are made.

Now I want you to follow this. The thoroughness of these Thessalonian believers led them into peculiar testings. And that is always the case. If you are not thorough-going, you will not have thorough-going difficulties. You will get through more or less easily. If you are thorough-going, you are going to meet thorough-going testings. They arise quite naturally out of your own attitude or your own disposition.

Now, you know that human nature and constitution is made in various ways. You know in general that we are not all alike. That is just as well! But we can to a very large extent classify human nature into different categories - what we call temperaments. In the main there are seven different temperaments, or categories of human constitution. I am not going to deal with that in detail, but there is a very useful point here on this matter. These Thessalonians were quite clearly of the 'practical' temperament, and the keenness of their particular sufferings was largely found because they were like that. I do not, of course, mean that other people do not suffer, but they suffer in other ways.

You see, the standard of life of the practical temperament is quick and direct returns. We must see something for our money very quickly! It is the business temperament, the temperament of commercial life. The things which govern this temperament are quick successes. 'Success' is the great word of the practical temperament. It is success that succeeds. The successful are the idols of this particular kind of make-up.

There is not much sentiment here. These people cannot stop for sentiment. Things that are not what they call practical are regarded by them as just 'sentimental'. They are not so, of course, but that is how Martha reacted to Mary. Mary was not sentimental, but Martha thought she was, because Martha was so pre-eminently practical. Again, there is very little imagination in this make-up. It rides roughshod over all sensibilities. It does not stop to think how people feel about what is said; it just goes right on.

And then it sometimes makes terrible mistakes - it confuses things. For instance, it mistakes inquisitiveness for depth, because it has always to be asking endless questions. The 'practical' people are always asking questions, questions, questions; they keep you going with questions all the time, thinking that this is an evidence of spiritual depth. They think that they are not just taking things at their surface value, they are being very practical, as well as deep. But there is a good deal of difference between inquisitiveness and depth. It is very possible to confuse things.

Now we want to get to understand these Thessalonians and the effect of the gospel. Can we not now picture them, in the light of what I have said? They responded quickly, and in a very practical way, and in a very thorough-going way. One of the major themes to which they responded was the coming of the Lord. Right at the beginning Paul says: "Ye turned unto God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven" (1:9,10). It was a big thing with them, this coming of the Lord, and they had concluded that the Lord's coming would take place, at latest, in their own lifetime. That was their practical reaction to the gospel, and it was good in its way. But you know that these two letters of Paul are almost entirely occupied with correcting a false element in that reaction.

Now you find them in trouble - trouble springing out of their own make-up - in this matter. They had been saying to themselves something like this. 'The Lord is coming - we have been told the Lord is coming, we have accepted that "the coming of the Lord draweth nigh" and we have accepted that to happen any day; and we were told that, when the Lord came, all His own would be caught up to meet Him. We concluded that all believers would be caught up, be raptured, and enter into the glory like that, together. Oh, what a wonderful thing - all going together into the presence of the Lord! But some of our friends died, yesterday, last week, and people are still dying. It seems to upset this whole matter of all being caught up together.' They were thrown into confusion and consternation because, instead of the Lord coming and gathering them all up to Himself, there were people amongst them going into the grave. It was a setback for their practical make-up, you see.

Now, the Apostle writes to them. He writes to them the gospel, the good news, for people who are in perplexity and in sorrow because of disappointment in this way, and he says: 'I want you to know, dear brethren, I want you to understand, that that makes no difference in the final issue. When the Lord comes, they will not have gone before us; and when He comes, we shall not go before them. It just does not make any difference. They that are asleep in Jesus and we who are alive and remain shall all be caught up together. You need not allow this thing to trouble you any more. You must not sorrow as those who have no hope, or who have lost their great hope - as those whose great hope of the coming of the Lord has been struck at by the deaths of these believers. There is really no place for any element of disappointment over this. It is good news for those who have lost loved ones - it is good news concerning the issue of life and death - that we shall all together go up "to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord." It is just wonderful.'

So we see that here Paul was able to bring in the gospel - the good news, the good tidings - in order to get over a certain difficulty that had arisen because of their make-up, their disposition.

A Help to Know One's Own Disposition

Let us pause there for a minute. You know, we should get over a great many of our troubles if we knew what our temperaments were. If only we would sit down for a minute - and this is not introspection at all - sit down for a minute and say: 'Now, what is my peculiar disposition and make-up? What is the thing to which, by reason of my constitution, I am most prone? What are the factors, the elements, that make up my temperament?' If you can put your finger on that, you have the key to many of your troubles. Asaph, the psalmist, was having a very bad time on one occasion. He looked at the wicked and saw them prospering. He saw the righteous having a difficult time - himself included - and he got very downhearted about all this. But then he pulled himself together, he recollected, and he said: "This is my infirmity; but I will remember the years of the right hand of the Most High" (Ps. 127:10). '"This is my infirmity"! This is not the Lord, this is not the truth - this is just me, this is my proneness to go down in times of difficulty. It is how I am made; it is my reaction to trouble.'

Now, perhaps that sounds a very naturalistic way of dealing with things. But I have not finished yet. If you and I will understand this thing - that a lot of our trouble comes because we are made in a certain way; it is really in our own constitution - we shall have a ground upon which to go to the Lord. We shall be able to go to the Lord and say: 'Lord, You know how I am made; You know how I naturally react to things. You know how, because I am made that way, I am always being caught in certain ways; You know how it is that I behave under certain strains. You know me, Lord. Now, Lord, You are different from what I am: where I am weak, You are strong; where I am faulty, You are perfect.'

Do you not see that the Lord Jesus, the perfect Man, is the perfect balance of all the good qualities in all the temperaments, that in Him are none of the bad qualities of any temperament, and that the Holy Spirit can make Christ to be unto us that which we are not in ourselves? That is the great wonder, the great mystery, the great glory, of the meaning of Christ as mediated to us by the Holy Spirit. It is the wonder of His humanity: a perfect manhood without any of all this that troubles us. Look at Him under duress: He does not go down. Look at Him from any standpoint of testing and trial: He goes through. But He is man. He is not going through on the basis of His Deity. He is going through on the basis of His perfect humanity, and that is to be mediated to us.

Spiritual growth means this, that we are becoming something other than what we are naturally. Is it not so? Naturally, we may be inclined to be rather miserable people - always taking a miserable view, always going down in the dumps. Now, when the Holy Spirit takes charge of us, the miserably inclined people become joyful, although it is not natural for them to be joyful. That is the miracle of the Christian life. We become something that we are not naturally. Naturally, we would very quickly go down under some kinds of criticism or persecution, and nurse our troubles, but when the Lord Jesus is in us, we can take it and go on. We do not go down, we go on. He makes us other than what we are. That is the work of grace in the life of the believer.

These Thessalonians suffered very much because of their practical temperament. They expected that that of which they had been told at the first would come about immediately. They were saying to themselves: 'The Lord will come - He may come today, any day - and that will be the end of all our troubles. But time is going on, and people are dying, and things are getting more and more difficult. It does not look very much as though the Lord is coming...' They may have been almost at the point of breaking and scattering. And at that point a new presentation of the gospel of the Lord Jesus came in, bringing the hope of something different from what they were naturally.

What is true in the case of the practical temperament is true in all other temperaments. We may take this as a principle. If we only understood it, the Lord is dealing with every one of us like that. He is dealing with us according to what we are. It is no use trying to stereotype or standardise the dealings of God with people. God's dealings with me would perhaps not be very troublesome to you, but God's dealings with you might very well throw me right off my feet. He deals with us according to ourselves, in order that there may be that of Christ in us which is not of ourselves. I say again, that is the work of grace. That is the mediation of Christ - that is the very meaning of being conformed to the image of Christ. It is partaking of His nature - something utterly different. But it is a terrible process. Now we have got to get through as these people got through.

Is that good news? I think it is. I think that is the gospel, 'good tidings'. It is good tidings for the man who is always too ready to drop out and give up and be miserable. It is good tidings to those who, because of their own natural expectations and reactions, are disappointed in what is actually happening. It is good tidings that Christ is something other than we are, and that we can be saved from what we are by Christ. It is very practical, you see. How are we saved from what we are? By Christ! Not by Christ just coming and putting out His hands and pulling us up. That is what we are all wanting Him to do. We are appealing to the Lord to come and do something like that, literally lift us right out of where we are. What He is doing is displacing us, and putting Himself in our place in an inward way. It is a process, a deep process, and it is perhaps only over years that you can see more of Christ. That person used to be such-and-such a one, but there is a difference now, you can see Christ now; they are no longer what they used to be, they are getting over that. They are being "changed into the same image". That is good news: good news for the Thessalonians, and good news for us.

The Test at the End

But there is one other thing with these Thessalonians. Things in the world were becoming increasingly difficult; they were going from bad to worse. These dear people saw things happening, they saw forces at work, and they thought: 'This does not look as though the Lord is coming, as though His Kingdom is coming. It looks as though Satan is having it all his own way. Things are going from bad to worse; and as to things being changed, as to there being "a new heaven and a new earth" and a new world state, all this that we have thought would come with the coming of Christ and His Kingdom, we do not see any sign of it at all. Rather is it going the other way: the world is getting worse, evil men are waxing worse and worse. There seems to be more and more of the Devil than ever there was.'

Now, the Apostle wrote his letters on that, and he said: 'Look here, that does not mean things going wrong; that does not mean disappointment for your expectations. The Lord will not come until those things have happened and come to fulness. "The mystery of lawlessness does already work". Before He comes, two things must happen.

'First of all, there must take place a great failing away.' A great falling away? Christians falling away? Professing Christians falling away, going away from the Lord, turning back? That is not very practical for these people! Yes, that is exactly what will happen toward the end. The nearer the coming of the Lord is, the more the test will be finding people out. The sieve will be at work. There will be a falling away; there will be many people - professors - who say, 'We are not going with this, we cannot go on with this any longer'. They will go back from following the Lord. It always was so. It was so in the days of our Lord's flesh. At the end it will be like that. 'Oh, how disappointing!' Ah, yes, but understand that that is how it will be, and that it does not mean that everything has gone wrong. It is just going to be like that. When the Lord does take away a people, it will be a people who have gone on with Him to the end; and He is testing, testing. 'Now, you Thessalonians, understand that what He is doing is testing you as to whether you will go right on to the end.' It has to be made manifest whether the root of the matter is in believers, or if it is only profession. So do not misunderstand the signs of the times.

And then the second thing. Antichrist, that man of sin, the Devil, seems to be getting more and more of his own way, they thought. And it was so. 'But', said the Apostle, 'the Lord's day will not come until that man of sin, the Antichrist, has been revealed.' 'Oh, we thought Christ was coming, not Antichrist!' Ah, but Christ will not come until Antichrist has come. Do not misunderstand things. If there is a mighty movement in this world by Satan, the Devil seemingly incarnate, a great incarnation of him - it may be in man form or system form, whatever it is - that is dead set upon obliterating everything that belongs to Christ, that is not a bad sign. That is a good sign - the Lord is about to come! That is the good news in the day when the Devil seems to be carrying everything away. That is portentous. The Lord is at hand.

"But when these things begin to come to pass, look up, and lift up your heads; because your redemption draweth nigh", said Jesus (Luke 21:28). So if suffering increases, if patience is tested; if Satan seems to be having it his way, and getting the power into his hands, do not be deceived - do not allow that to say to you, 'Well, our hope is not being realised.' Turn it round the other way, and say, 'These are the very things that say that our hope is about to be realised.' This is good news for the day of adversity, good news for Christians in suffering, good news when Satan is doing his worst. The Lord is at hand!

The Summing up of the Whole Matter

But where shall we sum it all up? We have always sought to find a little fragment in which it can be all concluded, and I think we have it here:

"Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it" (1 Thess. 5:24).

Here is the conclusion and summing up of the whole matter. Yes, beloved ones are dying, going to the Lord. Time is dragging on. The Devil is apparently gaining power and doing his worst. We, the Lord's people, are in suffering: nevertheless, God is able to see us through. "Who will also do it." What more do we want? Over against everything else - 'He will also do it.' That is good news! After all, and in the final summing up, the good news is that it is not left with us. It is the Lord's matter. What is left to us is to believe God, to seek to understand His ways, to be steadfast, to hope unto the end, and then the Lord takes over. "Faithful is he that calleth you, who will also do it." Good news!

Chapter 8 - In His Letters to Timothy

"...the gospel of the glory of the blessed God, which was committed to my trust" (1 Tim. 1:11).

"Be not ashamed therefore of the testimony of our Lord, nor of me his prisoner: but suffer hardship with the gospel according to the power of God..." (2 Tim. 1:8).

"...our Saviour Jesus Christ... abolished death, and brought life and incorruption to light through the gospel, whereunto I was appointed a herald, and an apostle, and a teacher" (2 Tim. 1:10, R.V. mg.).

"Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, of the seed of David, according to my gospel..." (2 Tim. 2:8).

We come now to our closing thoughts on what Paul called "the gospel which I preach". "The gospel of the glory of the blessed God". We need, in the first place, just to note the correct translation of these words, because the different versions render them in different ways. The Authorised Version has: "the glorious gospel of the blessed God". You will note how different this is from the Revised Version from which I have quoted above. The latter - the Revised - is the correct rendering of the statement, and the point in getting it right is this. Paul is not speaking of what the gospel is about - the content of the gospel. He is speaking of the gospel which has to do with the manifestation of the glory of God. That may sound a little technical, but it is very important. Let me repeat: what Paul has in mind here is the gospel, or the good tidings, which is concerned with the manifestation of the glory of God. The glory of God in manifestation - that is the gospel.

Note another thing: "the gospel of the glory of the blessed God". There is a translation which changes that word, and uses the word 'happy' in the place of 'blessed': "the gospel of the glory of the happy God". But that does not sound quite right, does it, in our ears? And yet, if we understood the real meaning, we should realise that that is not an altogether inappropriate word.

There are two Greek words translated 'blessed' in the New Testament. One, which is much the more common, literally just means 'well spoken of'. That is its literal meaning, but in the New Testament it is almost exclusively used in the sense of 'blessed', and is so translated. That, however, is not the word that is used here. The word used here - the second of the two words to which I have referred - is one that occurs far less frequently. It is a word which expresses that which properly speaking is true of God alone: that is, the uniqueness of God as to what He is in Himself, altogether apart from what men think of Him or say about Him. It is just what He is in Himself. You may think what you like, and say what you like, but God is this. This is the word here translated 'blessed'. The word really means that solemn, calm, restful, perpetual gladness that fills the heart of God. If you can get the feeling of that definition, you have got somewhere near understanding the meaning of the word here translated 'blessed'. It is the gospel of the glory of the calm, restful, confident gladness of the heart of God; the good news, the good tidings, of that.

The Good Tidings of the Glory of God

What is this glory of God which becomes that gospel, that good news? It is the glory of God in the revelation of Himself in His Son Jesus Christ. The revelation of Himself. In the Old Testament the glory of God has symbolic form, as we know. For instance, in the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle, between the cherubim on the mercy seat, the glory was found. The glory covered the mercy seat. It was a light streaming down upon the mercy seat, upon the ark of the covenant; streaming down and focusing there. It was heavenly radiance. It was but a symbol. That which it symbolized is here - the light of God streaming down upon, and through, His Son Jesus Christ. That is the glory of God. Paul in writing to the Corinthians puts it in this way: "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Cor. 4:6). It is that which is in the Lord Jesus of God's perfectly restful, calm, tranquil, abiding satisfaction.

The Glory of God in a Man

Now, here is a very remarkable thing. You bear about the glory of God. Much is said about it, and you are told that that is what you will find in the Bible; that, if you go to the Bible, there you will find much about the glory of God. When you take up the Bible looking for the glory of God, what do you find? A Man! You find that you are confronted with a Man. You cannot get away from that Man: the Old Testament is always pointing, by numerous means and methods and ways, to a Man; the New Testament, from beginning to end, has one Man in view, a Man always in view. So that you have to say: 'This is the answer to my quest. I am in quest of the knowledge of the glory of God, and God's answer to the quest is a Man.' That is but an exposition of this little phrase, "the gospel of the glory of the blessed God", which is the revelation of God in His Son, Jesus Christ.

God is here represented as being in a state of perfect tranquillity, restfulness, calm, abiding assurance and satisfaction and joy, and everything that can be summed up in the word ' blessedness '. God is represented as being, God is stated to be, in that condition. What is the basis of that state of God? It is just that God has found a perfect, a complete, expression of Himself in a Man. Yes, we know who that Man was. I am not overlooking or setting aside His Deity, His own Godhead, but I am not thinking about that just now. You see, God created man with very, very high purposes. Indeed, man was created in order to answer to and satisfy the heart of God: and when we say that, we are saying tremendous things. To satisfy the heart of God! There are some people who take a lot of satisfying. Indeed, they never do seem satisfied. Things are always falling short of their standard and their ideal. But you can go a long way, you can go as far as it is possible to go with any human conception of satisfaction, and you still fall far, far short, infinitely short, of God's idea. God is so much greater, so much more wonderful.

We have in the fallen creation but a faint reflection of how wonderful and great God is. Yet even when we view this very creation as it is, with all its faults and weaknesses and variations and so on, we have to stand in awe and worship. We can see just a faint indication of what a wonderful God He is, and of how much it must take to satisfy Him. Yet here He is in a state of absolute satisfaction, calm, tranquil, restful, happy, because all those thoughts of His, all those desires of His, all those intentions of His, and all those first undertakings of His, have now been consummated and perfected - not in the creation generally, but in a Man. That Man answers to God to the very last requirement of that infinite Mind. How great Christ is! God finds, therefore, His happiness, His blessedness, His satisfaction, His tranquillity, in that.

A Representative Man

Perhaps you may think, 'That is a beautiful thing to say, those are very wonderful thoughts to express, but where is the practical value of it?' Ah, that is just the gospel, you see. Do you think that the Lord Jesus, God's Son, came through and took the position of man, and was made perfect to God's utter and final satisfaction, just in order that God should have that in one Man? No, the gospel is this, that the Lord Jesus is representative of all the men that God is going to have. He is representative and He is inclusive. The old and beautiful beginning of the gospel, which you and I, after long familiarity with it, still often need, for our own tranquillity, to grasp more perfectly, is just this: that Jesus Christ, God's Son, is a sphere into which we are called, bidden, invited to enter by faith, so that we are hidden in Him as to what we are ourselves; God sees only Him and not us. A wonderful thing! You have got to put aside all your arguments and all your questions, and accept God's fact. That this phrase, "in Christ", occurs two hundred times and more in the New Testament must surely mean something.

God Sees Us in Christ

The first, and perhaps the all-inclusive, thing that it means, is that, if you are in Christ, God sees Christ instead of seeing you. I have a little piece of paper here. Let that represent you or me in ourselves, what we are. I put it into a book, and that book represents Christ. You do not see the paper any more you only see the book. That is our position "in Christ". That is what Christ means. All His satisfaction to God is put to our account. That is the gospel: when you and I are in Christ, God is satisfied with us - tranquil, happy, blessed. Oh, wonderful gospel! You cannot grasp it, or explain it, but there is the fact stated. This is the gospel of the glory of the satisfied God.

Putting again the test that we were applying in other connections in an earlier chapter, it is just this: that, when you and I really come into Christ and find our place in Christ, one of the first things of which we are conscious is that all the strain has gone out; we have come to rest. A marvellous tranquillity, that is not natural, has come into us. We feel the battle is all over between us and God. It is wonderful; a blessed, happy condition. Now, that is our experience, but what is the significance of it? It is the Spirit of the happy God bearing witness to God's happiness in our hearts. "The gospel of the glory of the blessed God". The first stage of that is a position. We are in Christ.

Christ In Us

The second stage or the second aspect of that is that Christ is in us. But we must not pursue that to the same conclusion as in the last point. That does not mean that we are seen and Christ is hidden. No, Christ is in us and we are in Christ: an impossible thing to explain, unless perhaps we can put it like this. Dr. Campbell Morgan was asked on one occasion whether baptism was sprinkling or immersion. He said: 'My dear friend, come with me to the Niagara Falls, and stand underneath. Are you sprinkled or are you immersed?' Well, I leave you to answer. But it is like that. Christ is in us. Why is He in us? He is in us as that very satisfaction to the heart of God, in order that the Spirit of God may work in us to conform us to Christ.

And that introduces another aspect of the Christian life: that, if you and I go on continually on the basis of Christ within, our joy increases. That can be put to the test. Stop going on with the Lord, and see what happens to our joy. Get away from the Lord, and see what happens to our blessedness. We shall begin to lament then -  
 'Where is the blessedness I knew  
 When first I saw the Lord?  
 Where is the soul-refreshing view  
 Of Jesus and His Word?'

Ah, but God forbid that it should be necessary for any of us to sing that hymn. It is not necessary. Go on with the Lord Jesus on the basis of God's satisfaction with Him, and the blessedness increases. God's happiness enlarges in our heart. Christ is installed within as the pattern, standard, and basis upon which God works.

Now, here is something fundamental. Oh, how long we take to learn this! It is simple, I know, but it is fundamental and it is a thing on which we are always tripping up. If we begin to try to go on on the ground of what we are, God stops. If we get on to our own ground, what we are in ourselves - our miserable, wretched self, that God regards as a corpse and a stinking corpse - forgive me for me for saying that - because it has been dead for two thousand years (that may sound amusing, but really it is exceedingly serious): if you get off the ground of "Christ in you" on to what you are in yourself, God says, 'I am going no farther'. All Divine operations cease. We can only continue as we began. We began in faith that Jesus Christ was our substitute, took our place with God and answered to God for us. That was our faith that brought us into Christ. We have to go right on to the end with the same faith in the Lord Jesus, and no faith in ourselves, and God will go on if we go on on His ground. The good news is that God is ready to go right on with increasing blessedness if we will only keep on His ground. His glory is in His Son, and He has no glory in man apart from His Son.

So Christ is our sphere, Christ is our centre, and Christ is our model, and we are being conformed, says the Apostle, until Christ is fully formed in us. Simple, basic: God's glory in Christ being manifested in believers, in the Church, because believers are resting upon God's satisfaction with His Son. That and that only is the way of the glory of God and the expression of God's blessedness, God's happiness. That is the gospel.

You see, it all comes at last to focus upon this. What is the gospel? When you have said all that you can about it, it is included in, and compassed by, this - God's perfect satisfaction, rest, tranquillity, concerning His Son, made available to us. Oh, that you and I might live without conflict with God, because we abide in Christ! Brother, sister, when you begin to feel miserable about yourself, repudiate it. 'Yes, I know all about that. If I do not know all about that now, it is time that I did. I know all about what I am; I know where that will lead me if I begin to take that into account. I set that aside. It is a fact - God has done it - that, so long ago, in Christ I was crucified, in Christ I died, in Christ I was buried, in Christ I have been raised. It is all in Christ. That is where I stand.' Maintain that position; abide in Christ. Get out of that on to any other ground, and the glory departs, the blessedness, the happiness, is arrested.

Good News for Young People

Paul was speaking to Timothy about the gospel, and Timothy needed good news, good tidings. To begin with, Timothy was a young man. A young man who is a Christian has his own personal problems - he has many difficulties and problems in himself. A young man represents the sum of a life at its beginnings: all the problems of life are resident there. Timothy was a young man. To such a young man, the Apostle says: 'It is all right, Timothy: you may be beset by all these problems and these difficulties, you may be having all this trouble spiritually in these different ways, but Jesus Christ is equal to the whole situation!' Do remember, young man, young woman, that the Lord Jesus is God's answer to all the problems of youth. That is good tidings, is it not?

Timothy was not only a young man, but he was a young man in difficulties of a specific kind by reason of his position in Christian work. Difficulties were coming at him from three directions. Firstly, there was the pagan world. What a challenge that must have meant for a young man in those days! It was a world that had no place for God, no place for the Lord, no place for the things of God, and all the opposing force of that world must have seemed concentrated upon this young man. Secondly, there were all the difficulties of the Jewish world. Paul hints at them here. These Judaizers were pursuing Paul over the whole world, with the determination: 'This man shall be brought to an end - this man's work shall be utterly wiped out!' By every means these Judaizers were set upon destroying Paul and his work and his converts, and Timothy was associated with Paul. Paul says: "Be not ashamed... of me". Association created a good many difficulties for Timothy. The answer is: 'All right, Timothy ; there is good news for you! The Lord Jesus is equal to that - He will see you through it all'.

And then Timothy was a young man in great responsibility in the work of God - in the Church of God. If you know anything about that, you know that you need a fairly sure ground of confidence. He came up against some very difficult Christians. But Paul said: "Let no man despise thy youth." There were certain wiseacres - people who thought themselves to be something - who were inclined to say, 'Oh, Timothy is only a young fellow, you know - you must not take too much notice of him.' They were despising his youth. That is rather a difficult thing to endure. It takes the heart out of you if you happen to be in that position. I remember so well, when I commenced ministry and became responsible for a church, where most of the church officers were old men, one of them was heard to say, one day, 'He is so young, you know!' But I had a champion among them, and he said, 'Don't worry about that - he is getting over that every day!' Well, that is very kind and nice: but that sort of attitude among fellowworkers may well take the heart out of you, when you have to carry the responsibility. Timothy was in that position, but this is the gospel for Timothy: 'It is all right: the Lord Jesus is equal to that situation - He can see you through that too'.

After all, it is really just this. It is what the Lord Jesus is "made unto us... from God": God's satisfaction. Oh, thank God that the Lord Jesus covers our faults and weaknesses and defectiveness. I once read a story - I think it was true - of a certain hotel on the Continent, where people used to go and stay for rest and quiet and detachment. One day a mother arrived with her little girl, and that little girl was just beginning to learn the piano. Every morning, first thing, she went to the piano and strummed and strummed, and all day long she strummed. Morning, noon and night she strummed, until those people became almost distracted, and they were counselling together as to what they should do, when a famous pianist arrived to stay at the hotel. He at once sensed the atmosphere, took in the situation, and when the little girl went to the piano, he went up alongside and sat down, and put his hands over hers and guided them, and there began to come forth the most beautiful music. The people came down from their rooms into the room where the piano was, and sat down and listened. When the recital was over, the pianist said to the little girl, 'Thank you so much, dear; we have enjoyed it so much today' - and all the trouble was over.

Yes, the Lord Jesus just puts His hands over ours. We might make a mess of things; we do, if we are left to ourselves. We upset a lot, do a lot of harm; we are so imperfect, so faulty: and then the Lord Jesus comes, in this blessed way, and corrects our defectiveness, answers to the Father for us, makes good our deficiencies - how? - with Himself, just Himself.

That is the answer; that is the good news - "the gospel of the glory of the blessed God".

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