

How God's Gospel Comes to Church

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[0 : 00] Amen. Please keep those words open in front of you, and as we look at them together, let's pray that God himself would speak to us through it. Father, we thank you that your word is precious to us. As we have said, we who are in Christ, we love your word, and we pray even now that you would make your word precious to us, that we would treasure it. And Father, that we would treasure, as Paul speaks about his ministry, that we would treasure the way that it comes to us.

Lord, not harshly, but gently. Lord, not to crush us, but to bind us up, to correct us, to teach us, to encourage and comfort us. Lord, we pray that you would do so now as you speak to us by your word.

Lord, for we ask in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, I don't know if you ever get messages from people that you don't know.

Last week, I got a message on my phone from someone I didn't recognize. I thought GDPR was meant to sort all that out, but it hasn't. The message said, Mom, my screen's completely broken, such a bad start to the morning. When you get this, can you text me on this number? And then another random number. It's so obviously a scam that it makes you want to laugh. I wanted to reply saying, probably not your mum. But it's pretty serious, isn't it, really? Of course, when you think about it, no one's more likely to reply to that message than someone's mum, right?

Worried sick about a child whose phone is broken, but there is no child, and there is no phone, and it's all a lie. False messages like that from cruel people. It's hard to believe there are people who live their lives producing messages like that to trick, to deceive people.

[2 : 23] We're coming into 1 Thessalonians tonight in chapter 2, where Paul speaks about the way that he, Silas, and Timothy spent their time in Thessalonica while they were there. In a very, very, very different way than someone who's out to get them, or to trick them, or deceive them. But why does Paul write these verses to the church? He seems to be putting up some kind of defense, doesn't he? Wouldn't the church kind of be thinking, yeah, we know what that was like, Paul. We were here when you were here. We saw what you did. He actually begins in verse 1, you know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results. He says later on, you know how we conducted ourselves among you. He knows that they know. So why does he think he has to write 12 verses on three special weeks in the life of a church that they would never forget?

You, the church, they clearly don't think of Paul as a fraud, do they? He says in chapter 3, verse 6, that Timothy has told us, you always have pleasant memories of us, and that you long to see us just as we long to see you. But what Paul does need to reinforce, I think, is not so much his trustworthiness as the trustworthiness of the message that he brought. You know, it could be, couldn't it, that because Paul was only there for a very short time, that they're worried they don't have the full story or the complete picture. Perhaps there's more Paul would have shared if he'd had time. So do we really have the real gospel, or have we been cheated? You know, I don't think the church wanted to ask those questions. They think really highly of Paul and the gospel, but under the circumstances, we can understand them, can't we, wanting to be completely sure that what they were suffering for was the authentic gospel of God and not a knock-off version or a bad replica or a false message. Now, to answer that sort of bubbling concern that could have been there, last time Paul pointed to their response to the gospel, which shows, he said, that God really is at work through the gospel that he brought. Our gospel came to you not simply with words, but also with power, with the

Holy Spirit, and with deep conviction. And building on that, Paul's reassurance tonight is not only remember how you received it, but remember how the gospel came to you. Remember how we were when we were with you, how we lived among you for your sake. That's another way to know, isn't it? You've got the real gospel because of how it came and who we were to you. And so these

verses are really about how God's gospel comes to church, because how God's gospel comes to us is part of what convinces us that it does come from God, and isn't just some human invention or creativity or cunning. And so if you're here tonight, just to kind of front load the sermon a wee bit, if you're here tonight and there's a part of you that is skeptical, or maybe more of you that's skeptical about the truth or the authenticity of the Christian faith, and you have doubts about it, well, here are three reasons to question those doubts and to believe it is true, or it could be true, to be open to the truth of the gospel.

And if you do trust in the gospel, well, here are three reasons to hold on to it. Whatever you go through for it, whatever you might lose, however you might suffer for it, three reasons it's worth holding on to, because it is the authentic gospel of God.

And the first reason is because it comes to church not only when it's popular. Just have a look there at verse 1, where Paul says, you know, brothers and sisters, that our visit to you was not without results.

[6 : 52] We had previously suffered and been treated outrageously in Philippi, as you know, but with the help of our God, we dared to tell you his gospel in the face of strong opposition.

So, Paul's saying, when we left the last place, Philippi, we had a choice to make. We were at a crossroads.

We were treated terribly there because of the gospel. So, are we really going to go and do the same again in the next place and go through it all again when we get there?

To put it in context, we find out in Acts 16 that what had happened in Philippi is Paul and Silas had been dragged to the court, accused of kind of introducing unlawful ideas and practices into society. They were stripped and flogged in public and then put in prison for the night. And the next day, the city officials came and tried to send them quietly on their way, but Paul said, hang on a minute, hang on.

[7 : 53] They beat us publicly without a trial, even though we're Roman citizens and threw us in prison. Now they want to get rid of us quietly. No, let them come themselves and escort us out.

So, the city itself had broken the law in the way that they treated Paul and Silas. It was the other way around. It would be like us being held in prison for more than 24 hours without a charge, that kind of thing.

So, when he says, we've been treated outrageously in Philippi, he's not kidding. But Paul actually says in verse 2 that they could only pick themselves up off the ground and carry on because of the help of our God or the boldness given by God.

Only with God's help and boldness did we dare, he says, to tell you the gospel in the face of strong opposition. Because if it wasn't God's gospel being carried around the world in God's strength and boldness, well, why would they have bothered?

Right? What could possibly make us carry on getting dragged to court or stripped or flogged or thrown in prison or beaten or stoned or a combination of that?

[9 : 20] The very fact they even made it to Thessalonica and dared to pass on the very same message that had gotten them putting handcuffs before. It shows that the message is the real deal.

Because it came then and it keeps coming even when it's deeply unpopular. Brothers and sisters, that happened a long time ago, but it should still give us really huge confidence in the gospel when we remember that the good news of Jesus did not take root and spread across the world in the first century because some really powerful and influential people got hold of it and poured loads of money into it and knew how to get things done.

It didn't spread because it was forced on people by the authorities. And that's just kind of what they had to go along with.

Paul was not riding around the world, was he on horseback, converting people at the point of a sword? The gospel had the impact that it did, not because it was popular, but in the face of strong opposition in spite of its unpopularity.

And that is part of what proves it's God's gospel and not a human invention. And that's still true today, that the gospel is deeply unpopular.

[10 : 45] Now, I reckon it's okay in our society to be a certain type of Christian. But to be the sort of Christian who believes that Jesus died for our sins according to the scriptures, was buried, and rose to life again on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, you know, seriously?

Isn't that the 21st century? What do you get with the times? Okay, be a Christian, but you really have to go along with all that stuff. But one convincing sign, brothers and sisters, that it's the real message, is that the church, we here tonight, we hold the gospel to be true and we share it, whether or not it's what everyone wants us to say.

And whether or not it's what everyone wants us to think. He pauses a couple of times in these verses that when he shared the gospel with them, he wasn't doing it to win popularity or praise from people.

He was doing it to please God. So, verse 4, he says, We speak as those approved by God to be entrusted with the gospel. We are not trying to please people, but God who tests our hearts.

So, he's saying, you know that we weren't trying to trick you, because if we were, well, what a rubbish and unconvincing trick it was. If we've been trying to deceive you with something, the last thing we would have done is brought you this gospel that is so distasteful to people.

[12:17] But we did it because we wanted to please God whatever people thought of us. Or verse 6, look, we were not looking for praise from people, not from you or from anyone else.

Again, he's saying, we didn't come saying what we said because we wanted everyone to be talking about Paul and Silas, or praising our names in church, or putting our faces on the banknotes, or our name on a plaque.

If we had wanted that popularity and praise from people, well, we just wouldn't have brought the gospel. But what we wanted everyone talking about was Jesus, and people to praise him, and calling on God in his name, because the gospel is God's gospel, and that's what pleases him.

Not you, not me, but God's. And the challenge here, I think, is, do we ever choose not to say things because we want that praise?

Or because we risk our popularity? Or because it's the unpopular thing to say? It's a hard choice to make, isn't it? We don't want to be unpopular because we worship at that church.

[13:40] Or we hold those beliefs. Or because we've staked our eternity on that message about a crucified and risen Messiah.

But part of what is convincing about that message is that people like Paul and Silas, and me and you, keep saying it. And keep holding it to be true, and keep sharing it, not only when it's popular and acceptable to do so, but when it makes people suspicious of us.

And hold us in contempt, or verbally assault us, or worse. Because we could only do that, couldn't we? And we would only have any reason to do it.

Because of God's help and boldness. We have only one reason, don't we? To share the gospel. And that is to please God and bring honor to Jesus.

That's part of what's so convincing, that it's not a trick. Because why on earth would we bother if it was? We sang earlier from the Psalms, though rulers hound me without cause, my heart fears nothing but your word.

[14:53] And our witness, it proves that, doesn't it? It's what proves to the church then, says Paul, that they could have the confidence that the gospel really was God's gospel.

because it comes to church, not only when it's popular. And secondly, Paul says, it never comes at a price.

So, in verse 4, Paul says, God has entrusted him and others with the gospel, as those who've been approved. As I thought about it, one way, I think, into this idea, is to think about the way a board of directors might handle a business.

So, these guys have been chosen to run the business on behalf of the shareholders, people who've invested in that business. And so, what the directors then do with that investment, it's not really down to them, is it?

You know, they're not handling this money to make the most money for them in the easiest possible way or the way that suits them. In a well-run business, the directors work hard to handle the investors' money for the investors' benefit.

[16:07] Because at the end of the day, you know, it's not their own money that they're playing with. It's someone else's money that they've been entrusted with. And in a similar sort of way, God has entrusted his gospel to approved workers, Paul, Silas, and Timothy.

So, they're not free to use the gospel in the way that suits them best. They use the gospel in the way that best pleases God. And what pleases him, as we've just thought about, is when people hear about Jesus and turn to serve and hope in him.

And this is really where the business analogy sort of falls apart, if it hasn't already, is that one of the implications in Thessalonica of them handling God's gospel in this way, is that Paul and the others didn't get an income from preaching the gospel.

So, verse 9, he says, Surely you remember, brothers and sisters, our toil and hardship. We work night and day in order not to be a burden to anyone while we preach the gospel of God to you. So, he's saying that they sort of worked on the side so that this young church under pressure wouldn't be put under even more pressure by the very people who were there to preach the gospel to them.

[17 : 27] Now, in other places, Paul defends his rights to get a living from gospel work. And Jesus, when he sends out the 72 in Luke chapter 10, he teaches them the worker deserves his wages.

So, Paul, in theory, in theory, he could have asked for a wage from the church for them to give him something to support his gospel work. He says, as apostles of Christ, we could have asserted our authority.

But instead, he says, we were like young children among you. Or if you're using a different translation or you look at the note at the bottom, it might say we were gentle among you.

The difference in Greek between the words gentle and infants is just one letter. That's why we get some difference in the translations. But as in every place where, nearly every place where that happens, it doesn't really affect our understanding of what Paul's saying, does it?

We were gentle. We were little children. He's saying, instead of insisting we have a right to be paid, he says, we worked harder than we needed so that you could hear the best news ever heard.

[18 : 42] We worked off our own backs to bring you the gospel for free because it's God's gospel and that's how he wants it shared. And so we did it to please him in the way we served you.

And again, that gives us reassurance, doesn't it, as it did for them, that the gospel Paul preached was from God and wasn't a trick or a scam or a fake.

You know how people today view so-called televangelists prosperity preachers who get rich from their preaching. It does a lot, doesn't it, to discredit the gospel in the eyes of the church and of the world when a message about God's free grace comes with a price tag so that the messenger can afford a lifestyle that's just unimaginable to the people that he preaches to.

It's obvious, isn't it, to everyone in and out of the church that what they're preaching is serving a human interest and not God's interest. And Paul is the total contrast to that, isn't he?

He didn't take any money. My hands are clean, he says. What did I gain from preaching the gospel to you? What benefit was it to me? The only benefit was to you and to the Lord.

[20 : 03] Now, just because something's free, it doesn't mean it has to be genuine, does it, in the same way that not everything that people suffer for is true. But I think it's one way we can at least rule out what isn't from God when you have to pay to hear it.

And I don't want to spend ages on this, but it's worth, isn't it, thinking how is this significant in our context? Our context is very different from a three-week-old church plant in a persecuted country. So how does this apply? Well, church costs money, doesn't it? Our presence here in the city, keeping the doors open, having services, our work, our staff, our building costs, everything costs money.

And I hope, if you remember here, that you give towards that. We're so thankful for that. Because part of the reason I think we give as Christians and as church members is so that anyone might come in or be invited or step in off the street and hear the gospel without having to pay a penny. Isn't that why we keep this place open? Isn't that why we have people to serve here, to volunteer and to serve throughout the week? We give freely so that nobody is ever priced out of the gospel.

[21 : 27] So we as a church, we as ministers, we take on the financial burden of providing and guaranteeing a gospel ministry that is for everyone. Now I don't know who gives and who doesn't give or how much anyone gives and that's right because the giving should come from the heart and not because of constant requests from the front.

As if it was a charge, which it isn't. And you might have reasons that you're giving less than you want to right now, but passages like this should make us think periodically.

Are we working harder than we have to in our service? Or giving more than we otherwise would?

So that everyone of whatever means in or outside of the church gets to hear the gospel here without being burdened by the financial costs?

And we can take that I think one step further. One of the really interesting things that I hadn't picked up until the other week is that in Paul's letter to the Philippian church in chapter 4, he thanks them because he says even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid more than once when I was in need.

So part of how Paul sustained his ministry in Thessalonica was because another church sent him money to be there. And we want to do that too through our partnership fund.

[23 : 01] We have the opportunity to gather money throughout the year contributions in our evening collection box and through other means and send it to church plants and missionaries and organizations and other places and persecuted Christians so that the gospel can be heard where there isn't anyone to pay for it.

Because if people are being priced out of the gospel, or a burden is being put on them to pay more than they possibly can to have a gospel ministry, well it stops being God's gospel.

It's distorted, it's discredited. You want to see churches started as this one was from the preaching of God's gospel that comes without a price tag to those who receive it.

Because that is what pleases God and that is what authenticates the message, isn't it? His gospel never comes to church at a price.

And finally, we know it's God's gospel because it doesn't come without parental devotion. Now I thought about having another P there, personal commitment.

[24 : 13] But I think Paul's saying actually a bit more than what we think of as personal commitment. He speaks of himself and the others as a mom and dad to the church. Parental devotion.

What kind of mom were they in verse 7? Just as a nursing mother cares for her children, so we cared for you. Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God, but our lives as well.

How does a new mom care for her baby? Or rather, how does a new mom not care for her baby? Right? It is round the clock, total care in every conceivable way. She feeds baby from her own body. When he cries, she's up through the night with her.

Her body hurts, her sleep suffers, her time is not her own. She gives herself completely over to the needs of a tiny new person because she loves the baby so much.

[25 : 21] I was reading an article recently that talks about how a lot of new moms feel like they lose their identity in the early years. And it feels like life before kids is a sort of distant dream that can't ever be got back.

You know, it's that serious, it's that deep. Moms need a lot of help and support. I hope moms here know that that is here. You can talk to somebody about that because it's such a deep commitment. It's all consuming. But that only underscores what Paul's saying here about him, Silas, and Timothy, doesn't it? Like a nursing mother cares for her children, so we care for you.

For them, sharing the gospel, it was all consuming. It wasn't a sermon once or twice a week. It was boots on the ground. The church had access to their whole life in a way that demanded everything of them.

It's not impossible, is it, that they were up through the night with anxious new Christians worried about losing their home, their family, their marriage, their job, or possibly, as he suggested, doing manual labor to pay for their time there.

[26 : 31] Paul says, we worked night and day. They gave themselves body and soul to these people, because that is how God's gospel comes to church, not only with personal commitments, but with parental devotion.

I was at a conference at the start of the week, and one of the ministers there has only been in ordained ministry a few months. He was telling me about how one Friday night, shortly into the start of his ministry, he just sort of got changed, settled down to relax into the evening, and he got a call to say one of the members of the church was dying.

And so he said, I got changed, and I went out, and I sat by this man at his deathbed, and I pointed him to Jesus, and we prayed together until he passed. Again, that is how you know that this gospel is genuine, that it's real, when people who preach it give their very selves and their freedom and their time gladly to those that they preach to.

Paul says, we were delighted to share not only the gospel, but our very lives with you. My friend described it as a privilege, a privilege, to have spent the night doing that.

Now I think, speaking as a minister, and on behalf of the elders, we're always going to feel like we fall short of that.

[28 : 05] As a nursing mother cares for her child, I certainly do not live up to that, but it's the model that Paul's describing that has to be the pattern of life for those who preach and teach the gospel.

It was not a nine to five. I don't know any minister who takes two full days off a week. There are days that start at 6.30 and they end at midnight.

And even if we do that, but we resent it and wish that we had an easier life, well, we're still not doing it because Paul did it because he loved the church and he was delighted to do that because God's gospel, it never comes to church without that total parental devotion.

on the part of those who preach it. So, how do you know which church to join when you have to move and find a new church?

Well, a church that preaches the gospel and where you are loved and cared for by those who do so. We want to train people in gospel ministry.

[29 : 13] What should you be ready to learn? If you're accepted onto that training program, how to share not only the gospel but your very life with a church family. How should you think of the elders in your church?

Not only as brothers, but as men who've put something of their life on hold to give themselves to ye. The same goes in sort of concentric circles.

We can think of the deacons in the pastoral care team. Those who offer themselves to the wider church to serve, to care. There's something of a mother and a father about them that should endear the elders to you as they love and care for you.

And yes, when they're giving you a gentle and maternal care, but also when they're giving you a bracing paternal care, your pastoral care, it's not only being there when everything's going wrong, but it's pointing you, pointing us to Jesus in every time and circumstance, the way of life he's given us.

You know we dealt with you, says Paul, each of you as a father who deals with his own children, encouraging, comforting, urging you to live lives worthy of God who calls you into his kingdom and glory.

[30 : 39] And when your church leaders are doing that for you, and we're emulating that and doing that for each other here as brothers and sisters, well that is one way we know that it is God's gospel and not a knockoff or an imitation, not just a message, but something that is transforming us and changing us and drawing us like a magnet to Jesus and making us more like him.

So these are three ways Paul assures the church that they've got the real deal, the real gospel, and I hope we've seen something of how that gives us confidence to in the gospel to believe this good news, to see that it is real, or if you're not yet a Christian, to be open to the reality of it, to consider that it's a possibility that people would really, would really lose their lives to preach this to you, or make a loss to preach this, or put life on hold to preach this.

Why would Paul, why would any of us do that unless it was true and real and life-changing? So let us receive it, let's stick with what we've received because of the way that the gospel comes to church, not only when it's popular and never at a price and not without parental devotion, and let's pray that that would be true of us more and more here at Bon Accord in the ministry, in the life of our church, that this would be ever more true of the way that the gospel goes out from here.

Let's pray that together now, let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you for your gospel, we thank you for the true words about your Son and what he has accomplished for us in his death and resurrection.

And Father, we receive it with faith, that we thank you, Father, that you are gracious and patient with our doubts, Lord, that you give us good and true reasons to hold on to it when it gets tough and good and true reasons to take hold of it, Lord, when we haven't yet done so.

[33 : 07] And we pray that you would work in our hearts, Lord, to convince us all the more deeply of the truth and reality and the worthiness of your gospel to be taken and embraced.

Lord, we pray that the gospel would have an ever deeper hold on our lives. We pray that the gospel would have an ever deeper hold on our life as a church. And Father, that we would hold dear these gospel values and principles that Paul held dear.

Lord, we pray that you would grow us in our love and devotion to one another. Lord, we pray that you would grow us in our generosity towards one another. Father, we pray that you would grow us

in faith and in our boldness to share the message that you've entrusted to us.
For this we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.