



Articles and Sermons :: What is the Gospel? by Mike Atnip

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Just what is “the gospel”? Etymologically speaking, the word “gospel” came from contracting the words “good spell.” In centuries long past, a “good spell” was a positive, exciting epic story. It was something to tell around the supper table and spread among the neighborhood. Something good had happened!

Today, we generally refer to a “good spell” as “good news.” “Did you hear what happened last week over in ...”

Unfortunately, the mass media will fill our minds—if we are foolish enough to let them—with all kinds of bad news: airplane crashes, oil spills in the Gulf of Mexico, endangered species, murders, and political bashings of every stripe.

It seems the natural man has a thirst for the gory and the ugly. One would think that amid the din of embezzlements, suicide bombers, and drug trafficking, the human heart would get so disgusted with bad news that he would begin a quest for something positive; some good news.

The good news is that a “good spell” has been told to the human race. It is an epic story of divine proportions, with positive, tangible results stretched out over many centuries of time ... and with the power to bring good results yet today! Who will turn aside with me from the roar of the news media to search out just what this piece of good news is?

There are, of course, many pieces of good news, even within the Bible. There are many “good spells,” but there is the “good spell,” upon which we will focus. It is first announced as a present reality in ...

The gospel according to Luke

According to Luke, the gospel was first preached by the missionary Gabriel. Now Gabriel was an angel, but we are told in Luke 1:26-27 that “in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.” Focusing our attention on the word “sent,” we notice that in the original language the word is a form of the verb “apostello,” which looks very much like our English word “apostle.” There is a reason for that, because that is exactly what happened: Gabriel was “apostled,” or commissioned as a message-bearer for God. In other words, he became a missionary to break the good news to earth. Let’s look at his message.

And the good news is ...

Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God. And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS. He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: And he shall reign over the house of Jacob for ever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end. Lu. 1:30-33

In a nutshell, the gospel that was preached by Gabriel on that glorious day was that she, Mary, had been chosen to be the mother of a king. This king’s name would be—if it were translated—Jehovah-Rescues. This was no insignificant detail, because in those days God gave names to people that represented their outstanding character trait. To be essentially named God’s-Rescue-Squad is quite the character trait!

If this piece of good news had been given all by itself, it would still be outstanding. However, several centuries of prophecies had been building up about a king that Jehovah would send some day! Some day—it had been promised time and again—some sweet day, God would send a special king to liberate humanity. Some day ...

And now, Mary had just been told that she would be the mother of this promised king! Imagine how her heart must have skipped a beat or two! What good news; both to her personally, and to humanity in general!

The problem

God, being a merciful God, began to give promises of grace basically as soon as mankind fell for the lies of Satan. By surrendering himself to what Satan said, and disbelieving the words of God, mankind sold himself into the dominion of the devil. Since God desires man to worship Him freely, He let humanity have a free will. Man was created in the image of God, but chose to submit himself to the "wisdom" of Satan, and not stay committed to—have faith in—what God had said. Man got himself into a mess; God really had no legal obligation to rescue him.

But God is righteous! To be righteous is to do what is right, even if there is no legal obligation. To do what is good because of an obligation is not true liberty; it is legalism. But to do what is good because of love ... now that is the righteous character of Jehovah!

And so God in His righteousness saw the mess humanity had gotten himself into. Legally, He was under no obligation to rescue man. Man made the decision to step out from under God's dominion and into Satan's control; it was man's responsibility to get himself out of his own mess.

But ... God knew man was unable to escape from sin's grasp by his own strength, so He "did righteousness" and set in motion a rescue operation. The rescue was to occur later on in history, but God submitted man in hope and began to share promises of that glorious day when Adam's sin and its consequential bondage to Satan and corruption of character would be undone.

The first promise of deliverance

Some day a descendent of Eve would stomp on the head of the enemy!

Only ten verses after Eve took the first bite of unbelief, we encounter God offering a promise of deliverance to His children, who now found themselves outside of His communion. In Genesis 3:15, we see God condemning the enemy with an eventual overthrow: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel."

Some day—some sweet day—a descendent of the woman would stomp on the head of the enemy. Yes, the enemy would temporarily cripple the descendent, but the very heel that was crippled would be the heel that would smash the head that bit it. And ... we all know that the head is representative of authority. It was a simple but clear word picture: someday a descendent of Eve would take away the authority of Satan. Satan had stolen man's loyalty to God by getting him to submit to his words instead of God's words ... but the war wasn't over yet! The righteous character of God would someday rescue His rebellious creation.

A prophet like unto Moses

Skipping over many prophecies of the future rescue mission, we stop for a moment to look at the prophet Moses prophesying that God would send mankind another prophet "like unto me." De. 18:15 Since God does not have a body, He sometimes needs a physical mouth to speak to someone. So He "borrows" a mouth. The person whose mouth God "borrows" is called a "prophet." This is especially needful if the person God wants to speak to is out of communion with Him. God cannot speak into that person's heart in a Spirit-to-spirit conversation, so He uses the mouth of another person—the prophet—to communicate His message.

So we see in Deuteronomy 18:15-19 a message from God to humanity, telling us that someday—some sweet day—He will send another prophet that would be as great as Moses.

The LORD thy God will raise up unto thee a Prophet from the midst of thee, of thy brethren, like unto me; unto him ye shall hearken; According to all that thou desiredst of the LORD thy God in Horeb in the day of the assembly, saying, Let me not hear again the voice of the LORD my God, neither let me see this great fire any more, that I die not. And the LORD said unto me, They have well spoken that which they have spoken. I will raise them up a Prophet from among their brethren, like unto thee, and will put my words in his mouth; and he shall speak unto them all that I shall command him.

At first impulse, we immediately think of Joshua the son of Nun, Moses' successor. However, we find an interesting note in Deuteronomy 34:9-12:

And Joshua the son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom; for Moses had laid his hands upon him: and the children of Israel hearkened unto him, and did as the LORD commanded Moses. And there arose not a prophet since in Israel like

unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, in all the signs and the wonders, which the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land, and in all that mighty hand, and in all the great terror which Moses shewed in the sight of all Israel.

We see that the author knows about Joshua, but then goes right on to say that Joshua was not equal to Moses. So the promise of another prophet was not fulfilled in Joshua the son of Nun. Some day, another great anointed prophet was to arise; someone who would have the authority to make laws and lead God's chosen people out of bondage.

A high priest like Melchizedek

In the middle of David's psalms, we find a curious line:

The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek. Ps. 110:4
Who was David referring to? In the first verse of the Psalm, we find the answer: "my Lord." Consider the following attributes of this "Lord."

He would sit on the right hand of Jehovah.

He would use his enemies as a footstool.

His servants would serve Him willfully.

His atmosphere would be charged with holiness.

He would rule gloriously.

And—most importantly for our present study—He would be a special priest of God.

Who was this prophecy referring to? And when would it come to pass? The promised anointed one—the Messiah—would serve simultaneously as both priest and king. Added to the former prophecy concerning the Messiah being a prophet of God, this would make Him to be God's prophet, priest, and king! Truly, this promised anointed man would be like Melchizedek... the only man in the Bible who had served simultaneously as God's prophet, priest, and king!

God's promised king in prophecy

While the Messiah would serve as prophet, high priest, and king, the prophecies give the greatest emphasis on the kingship of the Messiah. Space only permits us to look briefly at just a few of these promises, but what promises they are! Isaiah 40:9-11 is where we will begin.

O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young.

We will focus on three points in these verses:

"good tidings"—These words are the same as "gospel." We find Isaiah prophesying about the gospel that would someday be announced to the whole world. The next point reveals just what that "good news" would be...

"the Lord GOD will come... and rule"—The good tidings is that someday Jehovah would set up a kingdom. From this point we move into the next, which describes the type of kingdom it would be...

"he shall feed his flock"—This coming kingdom would be characterized by a shepherd gently carrying a hurt lamb. Moving a couple of chapters ahead in the book of Isaiah, we will look briefly at chapter 52, verse 7:

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!

Once again we see the gospel as being the announcing of God reigning in goodness and peace. For people continuously oppressed by enemies, such an announcement would make their hearts leap for joy!

The good news of grace to the earth

Moving on (and realizing that we are only catching a few of the prophecies), we come to Isaiah 61. For the sake of space, we will not print the text here. Let's walk through this beautiful chapter, noting a few high points.

Once again we find hints that someday a gospel would be preached. To whom? To the meek, the brokenhearted, the

captives, and the prisoners.

What was this good news? It would be the coming of Jehovah's grace (literal rendition of "acceptable year of the Lord"). And what would this grace do?

It would give comfort.

It would cause men to produce righteousness like a tree produces fruit, to the glory of the LORD.

Areas of life that had long been ruined would be restored to productivity.

What God's people formerly served in bondage would now serve them instead.

People formerly disconnected with God would serve as priests and ministers.

For all the shameful actions in the past, doubly glorious deeds would replace them.

God Himself would direct the labors of His people.

God would make an eternal covenant with His people.

His people would be recognized on all sides as a people blessed by God.

Righteous deeds and praise would cover God's people like a cloak, beautifying them; they would sprout out of His people like seeds in a fertile garden.

What a "good spell" that was! I can imagine readers of Isaiah's prophecies lifting their eyes to heaven and saying, "Let your kingdom come soon, LORD!"

Before passing into the New Testament, we will briefly consider one more prophecy of the gospel. Nahum 1:15:

Behold upon the mountains the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace! O Judah, keep thy solemn feasts, perform thy vows: for the wicked shall no more pass through thee; he is utterly cut off.

Here we see a prophecy of a messenger coming over the mountains with some good news: The wicked usurper would be "utterly cut off." What a promise! He who before walked to and fro among God's people wreaking havoc would someday simply be cast out of the land... forever.

Realizing that we have skipped over many prophecies concerning God's kingdom, we will now move into the fulfillment.

The glad tidings are announced

Eighty and six times the four writers of the gospels reference the kingdom of God, or the kingdom of heaven. Mere numerical statistics should not decide what is the most important aspect of God's message to humanity—but can we ignore 86 references as insignificant? While the theme of salvation is in one sense synonymous with the kingdom of God, it is interesting to note that the four Gospels only speak half as many times in terms of "salvation" or "saved" as they do to God's kingdom.

Going back to the missionary Gabriel's announcement to Mary, we find that his good news was that she would be the mother of the promised king.

Moving into the next chapter, the gospel is preached to some shepherds in their fields at night:

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And the gospel was "... the Messiah has been born! The promised Prophet, High Priest, and King!

Moving on into chapter 4, we find Jesus in a synagogue, reading Isaiah 61, which we looked at earlier. What was His conclusion about this time of grace that was to come?

This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.

All of those promises were set to begin manifesting themselves. The time of liberation had come! The time when God's Anointed would come and break the shackles of sin, self, and Satan, and begin to reign in the hearts of men, just like He had before man believed the lies of the enemy and was taken captive in the Garden of Eden.

Once again men would begin to live in peace one with another—instead of fighting for material gain. Once again would husbands and wives love one another—instead of seeking personal gratification. Once again the poor would be

remembered—instead of every man fending for himself. Once again man would live for the glory of God—instead of living for pleasure.

But how?

How would this all come to pass? How would the King pull it off to get self-centered little wretches—like we are all born as—to become gentle, kind, holy, and charitable?

The Messiah would do a work of pure grace by transplanting His own heart into the heart of men who did nothing to deserve it.

The “secret”

The secret to entering the kingdom is given to us by the prophet Ezekiel in 36:27—

And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them. God, recognizing man’s inability to salvage himself from his own mess, would do a work of pure, unmerited favor: He would take a piece of His own heart and transplant it back into man. Man’s own heart was desperately wicked; perverted and degenerated, corrupted by the cancer of selfishness. And man was powerless to cure the disease.

But the Messiah would heal man of all his diseases!

“Whosoever will . . .”

One of the biggest questions—and a valid one—that often comes up is how come, if the kingdom of God has come to earth, not everyone is serving the King? Is the Anointed One unable to conquer? Why is so much evil still on earth if Jesus is reigning?

The answer lies in the will of man. God wants people to serve Him of a free will, to obey Him out of love, not by force. Jesus could easily come and make up an army and force everyone to outwardly live up to a certain standard. Or, He could come and make zombies out of all of us, taking our freedom of choice away and making us do what He wants. But we are not animals, and He does not want us to be animals. He wants us to be men and women, men and women who voluntarily submit ourselves to His lordship.

The beauty of willful love

The beauty of the kingdom of God is not that the enemy is totally eradicated, but that Messiah’s kingdom is set up—and continues triumphant—smack in the middle of enemy territory!

Here we are, in a world in which the vast majority go rushing on in sin and pleasures, fighting and warring, hating and sassing to each other. In the middle of it all stands Jesus, calling for His sheep to turn around and walk a different path, to march to the beat of a different drummer. It is totally a free-will choice, in which all the odds are against man to choose to be an oddball and go against the flow of the mass of humanity. But that is the beauty of the whole system!

We see a man. He is in the midst of a frenzied crowd, rushing down a slippery slope. We see the heart of that man is just like the rest of the crowd about him—greatly enjoying all the delights that his flesh offers him. And we see an enemy hovering over him, whispering lies to him.

But . . .

The man hears the voice of the Messiah calling him into another kingdom; and the man decides to hearken. The world about him is against his choice. The desires of his own heart pull him away from the call. The devil himself is telling him it is all a delusion. But . . .

He decides to change his allegiance and return to the King . . . because he loves Him!

Would it be so beautiful, so meaningful, if everything were the opposite? If everyone about him was urging him to repentance? If his own body didn’t really delight in fleshly pleasures? If the devil was ignoring him and even

encouraging him to return to God? No, it only adds to the beauty of God's kingdom that it was set up right in the middle of the enemy's kingdom. It is like the glory of an earthly army that drops a load of paratroopers into the midst of enemy territory, and they successfully set up camp—surrounded on all sides by those that hate them!

Jesus will not set us before a firing squad, demanding obedience. We serve Him willingly, or not at all!

A common error

One common error of man is to try to bring the rule of God to reality by force. This is either by armed force or by political force. Jesus refused both. When some wanted to make Him a political king, He disappeared from the scene! Whoever wanted Jesus to reign over them would have to personally give Him permission. Unless and until a man was willing to serve Him of his own will, Jesus would not sit on the throne of his heart.

Consider the following quote, attributed to Napoleon in his exile.

Alexander, Caesar, Charlemagne, and I myself have founded great empires; but upon what did these creations of our genius depend? Upon force. Jesus alone founded His empire upon love, and to this very day millions will die for Him. I have inspired multitudes with such an enthusiastic devotion that they would have died for me... but to do this it was necessary that I should be visibly present with the electric influence of my looks, my words, of my voice. When I saw men and spoke to them, I lightened up the flame of self-devotion in their hearts... Christ alone has succeeded in so raising the mind of man toward the unseen, that it becomes insensible to the barriers of time and space. Across a chasm of eighteen hundred years, Jesus Christ makes a demand that is beyond all others difficult to satisfy; He asks for that which a philosopher may often seek in vain at the hands of his friends, or a father of his children, or a bride of her spouse, or a man of his brother. He asks for the human heart; He will have it entirely to Himself. He demands it unconditionally; and forth with His demand is granted. Wonderful! In defiance of time and space, the soul of man, with all its powers and faculties, becomes an annexation to the empire of Christ. All who sincerely believe in Him experience that remarkable, supernatural love toward Him. This phenomenon is unaccountable; it is altogether beyond the scope of man's creative powers. Time, the great destroyer, is powerless to extinguish this sacred flame; time can neither exhaust its strength nor put a limit to its range. This is it, which strikes me most; I have often thought of it. This is it which proves to me quite convincingly the Divinity of Jesus Christ.

While Napoleon seemed to have grasped the secret of conquest in the kingdom of God—pure, voluntary love—many Christians struggle with trying to mix political conquest into the formula. Consider the following quote by an author promoting mixing politics and the kingdom of God:

This is the crux of Christian political action. This is the task that confronts us: salvation and godly rule. We are to be more than just salt: preserving. We are to be light: reclaiming (Matthew 5:13-16). We are more than just priests. We are overcomers (Revelation 2:7), more than conquerors in Him (Romans 8:37).

... Does this then mean that God-fearing, Bible-believing, law-abiding believers in the Lord Jesus Christ have no place in the political sphere?

Obviously not.

Christians have an obligation, a mandate, a commission, a holy responsibility to reclaim the land for Jesus Christ—to have dominion in the civil structures, just as in every other aspect of life and godliness.

But it is dominion that we are after. Not just a voice.

It is dominion we are after. Not just influence.

It is dominion we are after. Not just equal time.

It is dominion we are after.

Thus, Christian politics has as its primary intent the conquest of the land—of men, families, institutions, bureaucracies, courts, and governments for the Kingdom of Christ. It is to reinstitute the authority of God's Word as supreme over all judgments, over all legislation, over all declarations, constitutions, and confederations.

Thy will be done

Jesus instructed His disciples to pray that God's will would be done on earth, just like it is done in heaven. Yet we never find the Messiah forcing His will on anyone. Either you served the Messiah willingly, or you continued serving the devil. Free will and force simply cannot be mixed; either we love by choice or we do not love at all. One cannot be forced to love. And God will only accept a relationship of love with humanity. Force—either political or military—can never bring about the kingdom of heaven.

I know I am repeating what was said above, but that is the beauty of Christ's rule: men serve Him faithfully, smack in th

in the middle of fierce circumstances that hinder him from doing so. It is like a man that loves his wife and is faithful to her, when he lives in the middle of a red-light district. Would the wife feel loved if she knew her husband was faithful to her only because she kept a shotgun behind the door, with the threat to use it if he dare not love her?

Conclusion

Man got himself into a pit from which he could not escape.

Yes, the gospel has been announced, the “good news.” Jehovah has come to earth to reign over men once again! God’s anointed Prophet, Priest, and King has come, and He has set up a kingdom—an “alternative society” with a totally different set of values—in this wicked world. Whosoever will may enter and be freed from the bondage of sin. Satan’s head has been smashed, his authority broken, his days numbered until his final destiny in the eternal flames of hell. Righteousness, peace, joy, honesty, humility, gentleness, kindness, and thankfulness can once more sprout forth from the heart of man, by virtue of love—the Messiah’s lifeblood—transplanted into him.

Man got himself into a real mess; a pit he could not escape from, a disease for which he had no cure. But God has given man grace to escape, and to live out His will once again on planet earth.

What a “good spell”!

Have you surrendered to it—believed it?

Have you let the Messiah speak to you His law (as the Prophet), reunite you to God by enlivening your spirit with His Spirit (as the High Priest), and change your citizenship to the Kingdom of Heaven (as the King)?

Whosoever will may come! ~