

The Gospel as Story

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In the first chapter of his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul introduces himself to the Christians in Rome as, "an apostle set apart for the story of God," (Rom 1:1). This story was the story of the coming of the Son of God into the world, which had been foretold by the prophets (1:2). Paul served God with his whole heart in the spread of this story (1:9). He had a passion to tell this story of God's love and deliverance (1:15), and he was not ashamed of this story for it was the very power of God for the salvation of all men (1:16), in that in this story a righteousness of God that develops out of faith was revealed (1:17). Someone may ask, "Where in these verses is the concept of a story?" The story of which Paul speaks is found in the word "gospel." In the language that Paul used in the writing of this letter the word for "gospel" (*euangelion*) actually means, "a message or story;" and this was not an ordinary story, but a story so powerful it could change the one who believed it from one existence to another.

A Gospel Is a Story

The word "gospel" is an English word that comes from an old Anglo-Saxon word *godspel*, i.e., god + *shpel/spel* (tale or story). It is a "good story" or "God's Story," later to become the word for the New Testament records of the life of Jesus; i.e., Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. As mentioned, the Greek word translated "gospel" is *euangelion*, transliterated in the Latin Vulgate as *evangelion*. It is used in the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint) to translate the Hebrew *besorah*, an announcement of something that has happened or is about to happen.

Euangelion is found in the New Testament in 74 occurrences for

the wondrous message or story of the coming of Christ into the world, because of the influence of the earliest English translations, it has been translated as "gospel" in every occurrence in the later translations. The verb form of this word, *euangelizo*, means, "to tell, proclaim, or deliver a good message or story," and is found 53 times in the New Testament. The one who delivers the message or tells the story is called an *euangelistes*, in ancient Greece the title given to the pagan priests who brought messages of the gods to the people. The one who brought evil pronouncements from the gods was called, "*katangeleus tou kakou* - a herald of evil." The telling and retelling of the messages of the gods developed into collections of *muthoi*; i.e., divine dramas or stories of the gods' interactions with human beings. These became the Greek myths of the Hellenistic world. The *euangelistes* was essentially a mythmaster or storyteller of the god stories of his culture.

The significance of this word and its meaning for the reader of the New Testament cannot be overemphasized. As mentioned above, it appears in the earliest English translations as the Anglo-Saxon term, "*godspell / gospell*," meaning, "God's story." A more literal translation would have been "glad tidings - a tale or story that brought happiness or joy to the hearer." This translation is obviously too long and is likely the reason Tyndale and the King James translators chose the Anglo-Saxon, "*godspell / gospell*" to translate the Greek *euangelion* and *euangelizo*. One should not, however, lose sight of the idea of "story," which is intrinsic within the original Greek word *euangelion*.

The gospel, as we typically understand the term, is the story of God's love for humankind and his deliverance of humankind from the dark powers of the world through his coming into the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. This story the apostle Paul calls the very power of God for salvation (Rom 1:16).

The apostle Paul is the writer who most uses the term gospel for the message or story of salvation he proclaimed; other New Testament writers also use it in the same sense. The very beginning of Mark's account of the story of Jesus is identified as: "The beginning

of the gospel about Jesus Christ, the Son of God," (Mark 1:1). In every NT occurrence of the terms, *euangelion* and *euangelizo*, they are used to identify the message or story of the Messianic deliverance of Jesus of Nazareth and the story of God's love and redemption of man. In fact, Jesus and his deliverance of mankind is the sense of these words wherever they are found throughout the New Testament writings.

The Gospel As a Story Of Jesus

Paul begins his letter to the Romans, (which could easily be called "The Gospel According to Paul"), by identifying himself as one who serves God with his whole heart by proclaiming the story of God's Son. As he writes in Rom 1:9, "God [is my witness] whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son." Paul says of his ministry, "So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel." In Rom 15:20, he says, "It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known;" and in 16:25, he identifies this gospel or godstory as, "the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery hidden for long ages past."

Then, in 1 Cor 15:1-2, Paul identifies the story (*euangelion*) he brought to the Christians in Corinth as, "the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand [and] by this gospel you are saved," (1 Cor 15:1-2).

He then goes on in the following verses to identify this gospel as "the story of how Christ died in accordance with the Scriptures, how he was buried, and how he rose from death on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures," (1 Cor 15:3-8). The Christians at Corinth, Paul instructs, had been saved by their belief of this story – the story of the Messianic deliverance of Jesus of Nazareth. The *euangelion* of which Paul speaks is clearly the story of the redemption wrought by Jesus of Nazareth, as may be seen in the following verses:

. . . I went to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ and found that the

Lord had opened a door for me, (2 Cor 2:12).

The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God (2 Cor 4:4).

Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, men will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else (2 Cor 9:13).

We are not going too far in our boasting, as would be the case if we had not come to you, for we did get as far as you with the gospel of Christ (2 Cor 10:14).

In several of Paul's writings, he makes it clear that the Jesus he preached to them was the only Jesus who was true to the story called "the gospel of Christ."

For if someone comes to you and preaches a Jesus other than the Jesus we preached, or if you receive a different spirit from the one you received, or a different gospel from the one you accepted, you put up with it easily enough [i.e., too easily-mwl] (2 Cor 11:4)

I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel— which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned! As we have already said, so now I say again: If anybody is preaching to you a gospel other than what you accepted, let him be eternally condemned (Gal 1:6-9).

Jesus was the central character of Paul's story, and this story was the only true, "gospel of Christ." This is the story that could redeem them, if they remained loyal to their belief in its credibility and lived in consistency with their profession of belief:

. . . conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel (Phil 1:27)

We sent Timothy, who is our brother and God's fellow worker in spreading the gospel of Christ, to strengthen and encourage you in your faith, (1 Thess 3:2)

He will punish those who do not know God and do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus (2 Thess 1:8).

To believe and share this story, Paul insists, is to share in the glory of Christ. He tells the Christians at Thessalonica that God had called them to himself, "through our gospel, that you might share in the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ," (2 Thess 2:14).

In the last letter of his life, Paul encourages his student, Timothy, to continue to tell the story that he had received from him, that he had given his life to as a herald of this story, that he had been made an apostle (representative messenger of Christ), and teacher (a trustee of the message or story):

So do not be ashamed to testify about our Lord, or ashamed of me his prisoner. But join with me in suffering for the gospel, by the power of God, who has saved us and called us to a holy life -not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher (2 Tim 1:8-11).

This story was Paul's passion, he could not possibly have believed it more deeply, could not have loved it more passionately, and, as its trustee, he could not keep from telling it to everyone who would hear. "When I preach the gospel," he says, "I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel,"

(1 Cor 9:16).

The Gospel As a Story Of God

The gospel is the story of Jesus; it is at the same time, the story of God; or more specifically, "the gospel of God." In Acts 20:24, Paul says to the Christians at Ephesus, "I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me - the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace."

Paul was convinced that this story was intrinsically filled with the very power of God, "I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." (Rom 1:16). In verse 17, he speaks of this gospel as a story that tells of a restored relationship with God that is acquired through believing the story:

For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, [or is from faith to faith] just as it is written: "The righteous will live by faith," (1:17 [Hab. 2:4]).

In Rom 15:15-17, Paul goes even further to identify his responsibility as a trustee and teller of this story as a priestly duty or sacred service:

I have written you quite boldly on some points, as if to remind you of them again, because of the grace God gave me to be a minister (leitourgon - one who acts as a priest - mwl) of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles with the priestly duty (hierourgounta - to perform sacred service - mwl) of proclaiming the gospel of God, so that the Gentiles might become an offering (prophora - a sacrifice / offering - mwl) acceptable to God, sanctified (i.e., having been made holy) by the Holy Spirit. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God.

In Gal 1, he states that the gospel he preached (i.e., the story of God he told them) was not something he made up, but was God's story given to him by Jesus himself:

I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ (Gal 1:11-12).

To the Ephesian Christians, he reminds them that by their belief of this story they had been translated into Christ; i.e. his story was a redemption story. It was the gospel (story) of their salvation (Eph 1:13). This spiritual translation from one existence to another (i.e., from existence "in Adam" to existence "in Christ") occurs through belief of the story Paul called "a mystery" (*mysterion* - something hidden and revealed):

This mystery is that through the gospel the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus. - I became a servant of this gospel by the gift of God's grace given me through the working of his power (Eph 3:6-7).

This redemption story, the story of recreation in Christ, was the story entrusted to him by God, and he spent his life telling this story that he calls, "the glorious gospel of the blessed God, which he entrusted to me," (1 Tim 1:11).

The Gospel As a Redemption Story

The gospel, then, is the story of Jesus, the story of God, and more; it is the story of God's redemption of the human race. This story that had so captured and transformed Paul was not only the story of God coming into this world in the person of Jesus but more, it was a revelation to man that the causative force underlying his coming into the world was God's love for mankind and his desire to redeem or deliver mankind from the powers of darkness that enslaved them. The human race is the object of the love a Supreme Being, the Creator of the universe, the very creator of man himself. This redemption story told by Paul may easily be called a story of divine love, "a love story."

There are several words for love in the Greek language. The word used for the love of God is *agape*, which literally means, "good-will toward." This is one of the major themes of Paul's story.

In Rom 8:5, he writes, "But God demonstrates his own love (*agape*) for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us." In 2 Cor 13:11, he calls God "the God of love (*agape*)." The very nature of God is expressed through his love for us. This nature is expressed through his Spirit (*Ha Rauch Elohim*): "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness," (Gal 5:22). And this love in the story Paul tells is the underlying motivation of God's coming into the world to save the human race:

But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions--it is by grace you have been saved (Eph 2:4-5)

God's coming into the world in the person of Jesus of Nazareth was a manifestation of his love for humankind. Paul says, reading from the Greek text literally, "when the kindness and love for mankind of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy," (Titus 3:4-5).

Paul is not alone in his emphasis on this theme in the story called the gospel. This is, in fact, a major theme in the Gospel of John and in his letters. The classic text is John 3:16, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." In 1 John 3:1, he writes, "How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God; and that is what we are." In 1 John 4:8, he states, "Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love. And further, in 4:9, he writes, "This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his only begotten Son into the world that we might live through him."

Conclusion

The term "gospel," as used throughout the New Testament, is, essentially, a story. It is the story of the life, teaching, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. It is the story of God coming into this world in the existence of Christ to show himself and his moral character to us, so that as beings created in his image, we may know who he is and, consequently, who and what we are supposed to be. The gospel is a story of divine love, an act of love that resulted in the redemption, the deliverance, or salvation of the human race from the power of sin and darkness – it is a redemption story.

This redemption is actualized in us by belief of the story. Belief in stories is something easy for people to do unless they have lost their capacity to believe. This is why Jesus took a small child and placed him in the midst of a crowd as said to them, "Unless you have the faith of a little child (i.e., the capacity to believe) you will not be able to enter the realm (kingdom) of God." Why is this? Because access into the realm where God reigns requires that we have eyes to see what is not easily seen without the wonder of belief, and it requires that we have ears to hear what is not easily heard without the power of belief.

Paul calls this story the power of God for salvation. What must be believed in order to find this salvation is that God has done something so wonderful for us that it can transform us. It can transfer us from one existence to another. It can change us from being a part of one world to being a part of another world – an otherworldly realm of existence where belief is one of the most powerful forces in existence. What must be believed is the story - God's story; or more specifically, we must believe that through our belief of the story God can cause a mysterious and wondrous transformation to occur wherein we are recreated anew in Christ. By means of this recreation, we are translated out of darkness, wherein sin reigns, into the marvelous light, where the power of Gods grace reigns (Rom 5:21). As Paul says in his letter to the Colossians:

For he [God] has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and has

translated us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins (Col 1:13-14).

We are talking about a story, a redemption story. It is the gospel of Christ, the gospel of God, the gospel of our salvation. It is a story that must be believed in order to be a part of it, a story to be lived out of, and a story that must be told to the race of man, *and we are the storytellers!*

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