

What Makes All the Difference

Dr. Ian Macleod

And there shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt, such as there was none like it, neither shall be like it any more. But against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast: that ye may know how that the LORD doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.

—EXODUS 11:6-7

Let me read to you [Heidelberg Catechism] Lord's Day 10.

Q. 27. What dost thou mean by the providence of God?

A. The almighty and everywhere present power of God; whereby, as it were by his hand, he upholds and governs heaven, earth, and all creatures; so that herbs and grass, rain and drought, fruitful and barren years, meat and drink, health and sickness, riches and poverty, yea, and all things come, not by chance, but by his fatherly hand.

Q. 28. What advantage is it to us to know that God has created, and by his providence does still uphold all things?

A: That we may be patient in adversity; thankful in prosperity; and that in all things, which may hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father, that nothing shall separate us from his love; since all creatures are so in his hand, that without his will they cannot so much as move.

Dear congregation, this doctrine of God's providence makes it so clear to us that nothing happens by chance; rather, everything that happens on the stage of human history is the working out

of the purposes of the Lamb of God, the one who sits upon the throne in heaven. So as we hear and when we hear and see in the news the coronavirus spreading now as a pandemic; when we see what before seemed so far away in China now in our own streets and neighborhoods; when we see such a leveling of humanity, a virus that is no respecter of persons, whether young or old, rich or poor; when we see people in a panic; when we see the shutdown of schools and transport and all these other things—then dear friends, what we must also see is the hand of God. It's at times like these that we must stop and listen to the voice of God speaking. It's very clear; it's certainly true that God is speaking in these events, and whether you listen to the many different opinions in the news or on social media, whether you hear the deafening silence of the atheists and the secularists who have no words of hope or comfort or perspective, what we must hear in all of this is the word of God. God is speaking, and really His message is very clear: Be still and know that I am God.

It was very striking to me a couple days ago when we heard of the confirmed cases of this virus in our own state and hear more broadly of the widespread shutdowns in other nations and even coming into our own nations, whether in industry or business or sport or travel. It was very striking to read in my own readings from Exodus 10–12 about these last plagues that came upon Egypt. There are many similarities, and there's certainly the same message, even if the outward circumstances are different. There's the context of plague, there is the fear and confusion it brings, and yet there is this clear message that God is bringing, as He does at the end of verse 12 and chapter 12. This is really what the Lord is saying this whole time. This is His purpose: "I am the LORD," and in all this and amidst the plague and the fear and the confusion, in all this there is this glorious message of salvation and deliverance from a disease that is far more serious than any plague or virus.

So this morning, we want to look at this passage in its context, and we want to draw from it three things that the Lord is also saying to us today. We'll highlight, therefore, in its context, three

verses with these three things. The first thing is this: God is the great sovereign. End of verse 12 of chapter 12: "I am the LORD." God is the great sovereign. Secondly, God is the great separator. In the middle of verse 7 of chapter 11: "that ye may know that the LORD doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel." And then thirdly, God is the great Savior. That's the last verse we read in our reading, verse 13 of chapter 12: "When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you." Well, let's examine these three things, then, with God's help.

Firstly, God is the great sovereign. "I am the LORD." This has been what God has been making known throughout Exodus; indeed, it's throughout the whole Bible. This is the really great thing. These chapters in Exodus are not really so much about Pharaoh or even about the plagues; these are really things that are means to the end. The great thing is this: it's God making His name known. That's what God has been doing throughout this book of Exodus. He appeared first to Moses, and he said, "I am the LORD." You find that in chapter 6, verse 2. Then he tells Moses to go to the children of Israel, and that's His message to them: "I am the LORD. You will know that I am the LORD your God," chapter 6, verses 6-7. And He tells them there, too, in verse 8, "I will fulfill all My covenant promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and you will know that I am the LORD." That's the refrain and that's also, then, what Moses comes to Pharaoh with; that's the message to Pharaoh: "Thus saith the LORD. Israel is My son, My firstborn, and I say unto thee, Let My son go that he may serve Me."

And that's the context, then, into which Pharaoh replies and defies this Lord and says, "Who is the Lord that I should obey His voice and let Israel go?" This daring defiance of Pharaoh is to defy the one living God. "Who is the Lord?" And yet that is Pharaoh representing a godless world. "Who is the Lord that we should obey His voice?" Pharaoh believed he was a god. He had many gods of his own in Egypt. There were river gods of the Nile. There were field gods for the harvest. There were gods for health, for

industry. There were gods in the sun and the moon and for light, and the Egyptian god Amon-Ra was considered to be one of the greatest of the gods, the god of the sun. But what we see here so clearly in these plagues is with what ease the Lord shows that He is God as He defeats these Egyptian gods. They are all polemics against the Egyptian gods. "I am the LORD," God is saying, "and not them." So, you have a plague of blood that defeats the river gods, locusts destroy the field gods of the harvest, the thick darkness that God simply speaks into being defeats Amon-Ra. Then, in this tenth plague, the Lord shows that He, and not the Egyptian gods, is the God who gives life and the God who takes life. God is the one who gives and takes life. The Egyptians were preoccupied with death and the afterlife. That's why you have all these tombs, these mummified pharaohs in Egypt. But here Jehovah is saying that He is the God who simply spoke the world into being, He is the God who with His word turned the chaos into order at the beginning, and He is the one who with the same word can turn order back into chaos if He so chooses. He is displaying His almighty power. "I am God and no one else." And this all then happens by His almighty and everywhere-present power.

So, we look at this virus today and what is God, therefore, saying to us but this: "I am the one who is in control of the industry of business, of health, of life. I have given all these things and I can take them away in a moment. I can shut them all down. I can bring everything to a halt in an instant. I am the LORD." And dear friends, this virus ultimately is a good thing, if it brings us all to the place where we begin to listen to God. Just like, as you remember with Manasseh, it brought him to affliction so that he would listen to God.

You know the deadliest thing in the world today, the deadliest thing in the world today, is to not listen to God. It's to ignore God. And so if God forces us, if God brings us to the place where we listen to Him before the final judgment comes, then this is mercy, because with the coronavirus, God is not just saying to us, "I am able to shut everything down in a moment," but He also is

reminding us, like He was doing here in Egypt, that “this is what I will do one day completely and finally. I will shut everything down, as it were, never to be reopened again.”

Indeed, if you would go into Revelation (and you can maybe read this on your own time), in Revelation 16 you see many of the same plagues being brought upon the nations again. Then in chapter 18 of Revelation, we have not this time Egypt but now Babylon, but representing the same thing really, the world power, the wicked world, the godless world. And what we read there in Revelation 18 is that in one hour—in one hour, really just the idea of something very quickly—everything has gone. Everything goes. In one moment, it was there, and now in the next moment, it’s not there anymore. And you hear all this weeping and confusion and mourning, and everything is shut down, and everything has gone, and in Revelation 18 there’s this refrain that all these things are no more. And this time, finally, there’s no Moses to be entreated to take these things away. This is final, and these plagues, and even this coronavirus plague, and any affliction we see like this, are God telling us that one day all these things will come to an end.

You have this refrain in Revelation 18, “no more.” The city of Babylon—the wicked, godless, powerful empire that it’s tried to create—is no more. In verse 22, it speaks about all the arts and all the music—the voice of harpers and musicians and of pipers and trumpeters shall be heard no more. And it speaks of the collapse of industry, the collapse of civilization as we know it. No craftsman, whatever craft he be, shall be found any more in you. The sound of the millstone shall be heard no more. All the industry gone.

Domestic life, life as we know it domestically; the light of a candle—no more. The voice of the bridegroom, that idea of joy and the things of this life—no more. Commercial life, the merchants who were the great men of this world—that’s what it says there; they were the great men of this world—no more.

And you see, what God is giving us in these, as it were, small foretastes and pictures of that final ultimate irreversible “no more”

is God saying, “I am the LORD. I am the LORD. I am sovereign over all these things.”

But let’s notice here, second, that God is also the great separator. God is the great separator. There’s a great difference that God makes.

You know, right now people are speaking a lot about what makes a difference, and rightly so. How quickly a government acts, how quickly you can find a vaccine, how good or bad a person’s health and immune system is—that’s going to make a difference. How careful people are with hygiene—that’s going to make a difference. And again, that’s all right and proper, but here we’re speaking about another difference. Now of course, just to be clear, with a virus like the one we have, a Christian can contract this virus just as much as anybody else. That’s not the difference that we’re speaking about here. But you see, what the Lord wants you to see and to hear now is another difference that He alone can and does make.

Chapter 11, verse 7, in the middle of it: “Ye may know how that the LORD doth put a difference.” Now here is God’s difference, God’s separation “between the Egyptians and Israel.” Now if you would go back to the beginning of this narrative in Egypt, the difference between Israel and Egypt was certainly obvious. It was obvious in this way, though: the Egyptians had the advantage and Israel had the affliction. The Egyptians had the whips and Israel had the lashes. The Egyptians had the homes and Israel had the hard labor. But oh, how different things are now when the Lord comes and says, “Now I will put my difference between these two.” And so, with these plagues you see it: now while there are lice and flies and frogs in Egypt, the Israelites sleep sound and safely. While the Egyptian cattle die with the hail, the Israelite cattle remain alive. While there is thick darkness that can be felt in Egypt, there is light in Goshen. The Egyptians are now plagued, and Israel is spared. But most strikingly of all is this last plague and this difference between life and death as every firstborn son,

every firstborn animal, in Egypt dies Not one firstborn son or animal in Israel dies.

These are very striking, and they're very interesting words at the beginning of verse 7 as well: "Against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue, against man or beast." Well, we all know how quickly a dog can move its tongue against man and beast, but God is saying here, "Against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue; that you may know that the LORD doth put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel." And this is in the context of this last plague.

Now there may well be a reference here to one of the Egyptian so-called gods, Anubis. This god Anubis supposedly was the god of the underworld and often came in a dog-like form. That's the way the Egyptians portrayed it, in a canine form. And the purpose of this god was to bring people from this world into the next, to bring them from life into death, to bring them from this world into the afterlife. This was the god Anubis, and he often supposedly appeared in the form of a dog. And here is the Lord saying, "Against any of the children of Israel shall not a dog move his tongue." But one thing that is abundantly clear here is this: God's people don't die one heartbeat sooner than God intends. The language of faith says, "My times are in Thy hands. Thou art my God even unto death." No plague, no virus, no Anubis, can touch the people of God, can move their tongue upon the people of God, without God's permission. The difference between living and dying is always and only a difference that God ultimately makes. So we may be patient in adversity, thankful in prosperity, and in all things which maybe hereafter befall us, we place our firm trust in our faithful God and Father that nothing shall separate us from His love, since all creatures are so in His hand that without His will, they cannot so much as move.

Now if that's true, if that ultimate difference is true, then that difference ought to manifest itself in the way we conduct ourselves, ought to be seen in the lives of God's people. Yes, in a time like this, we take precautions but we don't panic. We buy but we

don't hoard. We do consider our own needs, but we also show love and compassion to others. We are not indifferent to this situation, but we tell people about a far greater difference which they need to seriously consider. We consider this ourselves and we point others to this difference that no government can make—no health care, no vaccine—a difference that only God can and does make. We point people and we reflect ourselves, we ought to reflect ourselves, on this final difference when the Son of Man shall come in His glory and all the holy angels with Him. Then shall He sit on the throne of His glory, and here the great sovereign is the great separator, and before Him shall be gathered all nations, and He shall separate them one from the other. Oh, what a difference. As the shepherd divides his sheep from his goats, and he shall set the sheep on his right hand but the goats on his left, these shall go away into everlasting punishment but the righteous into life eternal. Then it will be seen so clearly, on that day—the Lord has put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.

The question now is, what are we really speaking about when we speak about this difference that only God can make?

And that brings us here to our third point, that God is the great Savior. Verse 13 of chapter 12: “When I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague”—the plague of death—“shall not be upon you to destroy you.” I'm not generally in favor of clichés, partly because they can often be misunderstood or said in an unthinking way, but there is one phrase that is much like a cliché (because of its frequent use) that is very good, and it's this: God makes a difference where there is no difference.

God makes a difference where there is no difference. You see, when we look at this, the difference God makes with His people, it is so important to understand, is not based upon an assessment of who is good and who is bad. God is not saying the Israelites are good and the Egyptians are bad. The striking thing about the tenth plague is this: that the angel of death, the destroying angel, as it is called, comes to the Israelite door just as much as he comes

to the Egyptian door. The angel of death visits the Israelite home. The angel of death visits every home.

And there are many ways you could see why this would be so terrifying. In the other plagues, the Israelites can, as it were, look on from Goshen. There're no frogs near them. There're no lice near them. There's no darkness near them. They have light. Up until this time, they could watch safely from their homes, but in this last plague, the destroyer is coming to their home and the destroying angel is coming there with a purpose to kill the firstborn, all the firstborn. There has been sin in every home in the land, and there will be death in every home, and in this there is no difference. All have sinned and come short of the glory of God. Death has passed upon all men for that all have sinned. The wages of sin is death. The Israelites deserved to die just as much as the Egyptians. They were wicked. They refused and murmured against Moses and Aaron and many other things, and you know, when we look at this virus, ultimately, it's a reminder to us too, isn't it, as so many other things are also, that we must all die. The question is not if but when, and behind that is sin. The reason we die is because of sin.

But God. But God makes a difference where there is no difference. There is no difference, because all have sinned and come short of the glory of God, but God makes a difference. God puts the difference between the Egyptians and the Israelites, and the difference comes through the shedding of the blood of the Passover lamb, the blood of atonement, as it's called, the blood that takes away the anger of God because of sin. God is doing all this. It's not the Israelites' cleverness. It's nothing they've done. It's all what God has provided. He provides the specifications: a perfect lamb, a spotless lamb, and then you kill it, and you take the blood, and you apply it to the doorposts and to the lintel, and you eat it. And the truth here that stands out is that in salvation God has given what God has required, and so, yes, this destroying angel approaches your house, your door, and has a commandment from heaven that as surely as there is sin in this home, there

must be death in this home. And that will not change; that cannot change. The soul that sins, it will die. But as the destroying angel approaches the door, it sees that there has already been a death. There is already blood spilled. And in the terms of the everlasting covenant, God says, “When I see the blood of that perfect Substitute, I will pass over you and the plague will not come near you.” Payment God will not twice demand. First at My bleeding surety’s hand, and then again at Mine.

Oh, what a message for a world crippled with fear and uncertainty. It’s not a message that we are better people; it’s not that we are good and you’re bad. That’s not the difference; that’s not the message. The message is this: that God has provided in the Son of His love a sacrifice for sin. God has made Him to be sin for us who knew no sin, that we might be made the righteousness of God in Him. The message is this: God is saying, “When I see the blood, I will pass over you.” Here is a cure for the plague of sin. It is complete. It is instant. It is available in the gospel for sinners. There’s no concern here with overtaxing a healthcare system. No, He is able to save to the uttermost all that come unto God through Him. There’s no need here to wait for a vaccine; there is a fountain opened for sin and for uncleanness. There’s no doubt whether this care will prove effective or not; the blood of Jesus Christ, God’s Son, cleanseth from all sin. There’s no fear here in life and in death; against any of the children of Israel, shall not a dog move his tongue against man or beast, that you may know that the Lord hath put a difference between the Egyptians and Israel.

What do we do with this? What do we do with this, this voice of God saying, “I am the LORD”? This great difference that He is holding out as the thing He is pointing us to—what are we going to do with it? Well, here in Exodus there is this theme of those who cry out for deliverance. There are two cries, at least, that fall on deaf ears in Exodus—two cries that provide no help and no deliverance—and then there is one cry that is heard and is answered. There’re two failed cries. Chapter 5 tells us, in verse 15, that the officers of the children of Israel came and cried

unto Pharaoh saying, “Wherefore dealest thou thus with thy servants?” And he tells them, “You’re idle. You’re lazy. Go back to your work.” And no doubt there is another cry in chapter 11, verse 6. “There shall be a great cry throughout all the land of Egypt.” The Egyptians now crying out to their gods, the Egyptians crying out to Pharaoh—but where’s the answer? Where’s the relief? These are failed cries that fall on deaf ears. The idols are dumb that blinded nations fear, and so are the gods of materialism, so are the gods of industry and of anything else—of sport, anything else—that we make a god. If we make it a god, it is an idol, dumb.

But here’s the cry that is answered. Exodus 2:23 says, “The children of Israel...cried...unto God by reason of the bondage.” And the cry—oh, there seems to be such a space and a difference in space—the cry reaches heaven, and in some of the most beautiful words in all the Bible, chapter 3, verses 7–8, the Lord said, “I have surely seen the affliction of my people which are in Egypt, and have heard their cry by reason of their taskmasters; for I know their sorrows; and I am come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land unto a good land and a large, unto a land flowing with milk and honey.” Well, here’s the question though: what are we going to do? Are we going to cry out to the Lord? But now listen, Pharaoh cried out to the Lord through Moses. And what Pharaoh did, is it really not the case with the vast majority of the world today? And indeed, it’s the case with ourselves so often. Think about it. Lord willing, when this virus is gone, how many people who are in such a panic today will be praying tomorrow? Doesn’t it strike you that every time Pharaoh has this plague that comes and cripples his land and destroys his god, Pharaoh hardens his heart and doesn’t listen—doesn’t it strike you, doesn’t it make you think, “What a fool. When’s he going to learn? When’s he going to stop defying this God that is so clearly so much more powerful than he is? What a fool. What a hard heart.” Ten plagues, ten prayers, ten hardenings of heart.

How many days of prayer would we have (and we're thankful for days of prayer, every one of them)—but how many days of prayer would we have if we had ten pandemic viruses one after the other? Most likely, ten. But how many prayers once they are gone? The message is, while it is today, do not harden your heart. Take this and prove this, because this is telling us, too, that, yes, God is longsuffering, God is patient. He came to Pharaoh these ten times—ten opportunities, as it were, to repent and to bow to the living God—but there is a limit. There is a limit to God's patience. There is here the death of the firstborn. The next Egyptian deity followed quickly by the drowning of Pharaoh in the Red Sea. "My Spirit will not always strive with man." It's a call to come now; it's a call to flee to this blood that makes all the difference. That's the message God is giving us. God is calling us by His judgments and by this virus, too, to know that He is the Lord and to shelter under the blood of the covenant, which makes all the difference in life and in death.

"The blood shall be to you for a token upon the houses where ye are: and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and the plague shall not be upon you to destroy you, when I smite the land of Egypt" (Ex. 12:13). Amen.

May the Lord bless this word.

The Preparatory Ministry of John the Baptist

Dr. Joel R. Beeke

And John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of a skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey; and preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose. I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost

—Mark 1:6–8

Godly Christians impress other people. There is something so contagious about their godliness that even worldly people sit up and notice. If you long for godliness in the Christian life, let the life and ministry of John the Baptist show you how to cultivate such godliness. John the Baptist was the forerunner of the Lord Jesus Christ. He was the voice crying out in the wilderness to declare the arrival of the Messiah. We have examined the prophetic roots of John's ministry (Mark 1:2–3), the main activities of his ministry (v. 4), and the effects of his ministry in Jerusalem and Judea (v. 5). We will now consider John's lifestyle (v. 6) and the content of his preaching (vv. 7–8).

The Lifestyle of John the Baptist

Two features of John's lifestyle were unique: his dress and his diet. Concerning his dress, Mark writes that "John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of skin about his loins" (Mark 1:6). John's garment was not made of camel's skin; rather, it was coarse

burlap made from camel's hair. This inexpensive, durable cloth was the common clothing of peasants. John's rough garment was like a blanket in which two corners were folded over and sown to make armholes, with a shawl of sorts over the back. To keep it in place, John wore a leather "girdle" (or belt), probably about six inches wide with some clasps. When he wanted to walk or run, he would use the leather belt to cinch his loose robe to keep him from stumbling and to prevent his robe from flapping in the wind. John no doubt also used this garment as a blanket for sleeping at night.

In the Mosaic law, the Lord prohibited the Israelites from keeping such garments as a pledge because they protected people from the cold at night and from the wind during the day (Ex. 22:26–27). Some authors describe how these garments also served as insulation. Although his camel-hair garment was heavy, it appears that John wore it in all kinds of weather, even when it was hot.

Regarding John's diet, notice that the text does not say that he *only* ate locusts and wild honey. In the Mosaic law, the Lord specified four kinds of locusts that He allowed the Israelites to eat (Lev. 11:22). For many of us, pulling off the legs and wings of a locust to roast and season with salt does not sound appetizing. But in Bible times, and even in some eastern and African countries today, locusts were regularly eaten. The Arabs eat locusts as a common food that serves as "a sign of temperance, poverty, and penitence,"¹ although at times these insects are considered a delicacy when prepared in special ways.

Honey is also mentioned elsewhere in Scripture. For example, Jonathan ate honey to strengthen himself in the midst of battle (1 Sam. 14:15–29). Samson was also strengthened with honey from the carcass of a dead lion (Judg. 14:8, 9, 18). Other Bible passages indicate the widespread availability of honey in ancient Israel, not as a sweetener for beverages but as a common food staple. Honey

1. H. D. M. Spence and Joseph S. Exell, eds., *The Pulpit Commentary, Volume 16: Mark and Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 2.

was often gathered from bee nests in the desert, especially in trees or under rocks and in their crevices (Deut. 32:13).² So, together with locusts, John's diet included wild honey.

Why did John wear such coarse clothing and eat such simple food? Why does Mark begin his account of the gospel of Jesus Christ by reporting that "John was clothed with camel's hair, and with a girdle of skin about his loins; and he did eat locusts and wild honey" (v. 6)?

First, *John's lifestyle resembled the lifestyle of Elijah*, John's spiritual prototype. When Ahab asked his messengers, "What manner of man was he which came up to meet you, and told you these words?" the response was this: "He was an hairy man, and girt with a girdle of leather about his loins. And he [Ahab] said, It is Elijah the Tishbite" (2 Kings 1:7-8). Elijah's garment of hair and leather girdle identified him as a prophet in Israel. Consider the words of the angel to John's father, Zacharias: "And he [John] shall go before him [the Messiah] in the spirit and power of Elias [Elijah], to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just; to make ready a people prepared for the Lord" (Luke 1:17). Thus, John came in fulfilment of the words of the Lord through the prophet Malachi: "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD" (Mal. 4:5).

Remarkably, the hairy garment became such a trademark of the prophetic office that the false prophets often dressed in such garments to deceive the people. The prophet Zechariah declared, "It shall come to pass, that when any shall yet prophesy, then his father and his mother that begat him shall say unto him, Thou shalt not live; for thou speakest lies in the name of the LORD: and his father and his mother that begat him shall thrust him through when he prophesieth. And it shall come to pass in that day, that the prophets shall be ashamed every one of his vision, when he

2. William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of Mark*, New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1975), 39.

hath prophesied; neither shall they wear a rough garment to deceive” (Zech. 13:3–4).

John’s dress and diet strengthen the case that he truly walked “in the spirit and power of Elijah.” It is then no wonder that Jesus says, “If ye will receive it, this is Elias [Elijah], which was for to come” (Matt. 11:14). The forerunner of the true and only Redeemer of sinners needed to fit that prophetic description.

Second, *John’s lifestyle was a stinging rebuke to his own generation*. Some have suggested that John the Baptist was a Nazarite, one who was set apart to God (either by a vow or by parental dedication) and was thus required to abstain from alcohol and grape products, haircutting, and touching carcasses (Num. 6:1–21; cf. Judg. 13:7; 1 Sam. 1:11). The angel instructed John’s father, Zacharias, not to give John any wine or strong drink (Luke 1:15). Some have suggested that this statement refers to the requirements for a Nazarite, but that is questionable. This much is clear, however: when John began his ministry, the priests and Levites, along with the scribes and Pharisees, were the official rulers, teachers, and arbiters of public opinion among their fellow Jews. These leaders often acquired great personal wealth and were ostentatious in their dress. Jesus declared that the scribes and Pharisees loved to walk around in long robes and sit in seats of honor at great feasts, even as they exploited widows for personal gain (Matt. 23:5–14).

John called Israel and its leaders to repentance, telling them that it was not enough to be a member of the covenant community by blood. He called them to a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins. He said that they were filthy in their hearts and needed the outward washing with water that symbolizes the internal cleansing of repentance and faith. John stressed that God’s great concern is for the transformation of the inner man, not the polishing of the outward appearance. Jesus cites John’s coarse clothing and simple diet to underscore his greatness. Jesus said to the multitudes about John:

What went ye out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken with the wind? But what went ye out for to see? A man clothed in

soft raiment? behold, they that wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. But what went ye out for to see? A prophet? yea, I say unto you, and more than a prophet. For this is he, of whom it is written, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. Verily I say unto you, Among them that are born of women there hath not risen a greater than John the Baptist: notwithstanding he that is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he (Matt. 11:7–11).

Consider the wonder of that statement. Jesus is saying that the newest babe in Christ who partakes of Christ and His accomplished redemption is greater in spiritual privilege than John the Baptist, even though he was the greatest man who lived before that time. Jesus says that no one born of women was greater than John. Thus, Mark's details about John's dress and diet demonstrate that, in some sense, his prophetic lifestyle embodied and validated his message. Mark's description of John also implies that no one can call others to a life of repentance and self-denial who lives a life of sin and self-indulgence in his speech, dress, and eating habits.

Had John used his office to make a fortune, clothed himself in luxurious dress, or dined on sumptuous fare, he would have been a living contradiction of his message. When the people asked John what they should do to bring forth fruits in keeping with repentance, John answered, "He that hath two coats, let him impart to him that hath none" (Luke 3:11). If we are to pray and live with conviction, we must validate our message not only with our speech, but also with our dress, our diet, and in everything we do.

John's dress and diet affirmed that he "was a living protest against all selfishness and self-indulgence, hence also against that frivolousness, carelessness, and false security with which many people were rushing toward their doom."³ Is your life such a protest as well, or are you rushing toward everlasting hell without allowing your relationship with the triune God to take precedence in your busy, materialistic life?

3. Hendriksen, *Mark*, 39–40.

Jesus calls His disciples to shine as lights in a crooked and perverse generation (Matt. 5:14; Phil. 2:15). In what area of your life must you grow in holiness so that your light shines more brightly? Are we like the people around us who mutilate their bodies with all kinds of tattoos and body piercings? Do we wear luxurious or immodest clothing, which Scripture condemns (1 Tim. 2:9)? And do we succumb to the covetous mentality of materialism? What a witness John was by the way he dressed and ate!

The Preaching of John the Baptist

Mark also offers additional details about John's preaching. Recall that John preached "the baptism of repentance for the remission of sins" (Mark 1:4). The form of the verb in this verse indicates that John was continually stressing these things in his preaching. These repeated notes are like the melodic theme of a great work of music, woven into the whole and infusing it with great beauty and power. There were two main emphases in John's preaching: *the incalculable worth of Christ* and *the crowning work of Christ*.

First, *John's preaching emphasized the incalculable worth of Christ*. John "preached, saying, There cometh one mightier than I after me, the latchet of whose shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose" (Mark 1:7). In his preaching, John emphasized the incalculable dignity, mystery, and worth of Christ, who, as Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) wrote, is "the majesty of the Word shod with the sandals of our humanity."⁴

The imagery is both touching and beautiful. John says, "Someone is coming after me who is far mightier than I am." In the presence of this gloriously excellent and worthy Messiah, John says, "The latchet of [His] shoes I am not worthy to stoop down and unloose." In the ancient Middle East, people easily understood John's imagery. If one had been on a long journey, his feet were dirty. When he arrived at his destination, he needed to have his sandals untied and his feet washed. That task was considered

4. Cited in Spence and Exell, *Pulpit Commentary*, 2.

so menial that only the lowliest household slave could perform it. A slave would greet his master at the door, stoop down, untie his sandals, and wash his feet. Even a student would not do that for his own master. According to the custom of those days, “All services which a slave does for his master a pupil should do for his teacher, with the exception of undoing his shoes.”⁵ John says of Christ, “Although He comes after me in time, I am not worthy to perform the task of the most menial servant for Him. I am not worthy to stoop down and untie His sandals. I am not even worthy to be the lowest slave of such a Master.”

What gave John such conviction about the exceeding worth of Christ? Christ says of His forerunner, “Among those that are born of women, there is not a greater prophet than John the Baptist” (Luke 7:28). John had such a sense of Christ’s superlative worth because he knew Christ’s true identity. John 1:29–30 says, “The next day John seeth Jesus coming unto him, and saith, Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world. This is he of whom I said, After me cometh a man which is preferred before me: for he was before me.” John concludes in verse 34, “I saw, and bare record that this is the Son of God.”

John knew that he was only a preacher, but the one to whom he pointed was the Creator, the eternal Son of God, the Word who became flesh. Through divine revelation, John also knew that Jesus alone had power to baptize with the Holy Spirit. God had also revealed to John that the Holy Spirit would descend upon the Messiah (John 1:33). John alone could announce the promise; Christ alone could fulfill it.

John understood that the essence of true humility for a preacher is to embrace the lowliness of self in the presence of a holy God. Although Jesus was John’s cousin in the flesh, John understood that Jesus was God the Son. So, when John preached,

5. TB *Ketuboth* 96a, cited in William L. Lane, *The Gospel according to Mark: The English Text with Introduction, Exposition and Notes*, New International Commentary on the New Testament, ed. F. F. Bruce (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 52n45.

a recurring emphasis of his preaching was the incalculable worth of Christ. John declared that he was not worthy to untie the latchet of Christ's shoes. In effect he was saying, "I am compelled by the Spirit and by my divinely bestowed appointment to be the unworthy forerunner of God the Son."

John made this confession at the height of his influence and popularity. He confessed the worthiness of Christ when multitudes from Judea and Jerusalem were flocking to hear his preaching. Some people even wondered if John himself was the Messiah. But John responded, "Do not speak of me as the Messiah; do not consider me to be the Prophet who Moses promised you; do not even think of me as Elijah. I am not worthy to perform the task of the lowest servant in the presence of the one about whom I preach. Behold the Lamb of God! He alone can save you from all your sins. I can only baptize you with water; He alone can baptize you with the life-giving, soul-cleansing power of the Holy Spirit!"

Dear friend, have you, like John, experienced Christ's superlative worthiness and your own unworthiness in His presence? Are you able to say with John, "He [Christ] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30)? One important marker of sanctification is continual growth in self-depreciation in the presence of this glorious Savior. When you reflect upon your life, do you often fear that you are not growing in grace? If so, ask yourself two questions: First, when you compare your life now with where you were at five years ago, has the worth of Christ grown or diminished in your eyes? I trust that you will be able to answer, "It has definitely grown." Second, when you compare your life now with five years ago, do you think more or less of yourself? I trust that you can say, "Oh, far less; I am nothing but a hell-worthy sinner apart from Christ's grace; in my flesh dwells no good thing." Anyone who is growing in Christ-esteem, declining in self-esteem, and sensing his unworthiness is growing in grace.

Second, *John's preaching emphasized the crowning work of Christ.* John pointed to Christ as the new Baptizer, whose dignity, power, majesty, and Spirit-anointing far surpassed his own. John

declared, "I indeed have baptized you with water: but he shall baptize you with the Holy Ghost" (v. 8). After His resurrection, the Lord Jesus met with His disciples for forty days, instructing and teaching them about the kingdom of God (Acts 1:3). He then charged them "that they should not depart from Jerusalem, but wait for the promise of the Father, which, saith he, ye have heard of me. For John truly baptized with water; but ye shall be baptized with the Holy Ghost not many days hence" (Acts 1:4-5). In effect, John says in his preaching, "Jesus is the Lamb of God; He is far mightier than I am. He is the Son of God, the eternal Word, and I am but a son of man and 'a voice crying in the wilderness.' His work is spiritually efficient, for He is the only one who can bear the sin of the world. The fruitfulness of my work depends entirely on His power working in me (John 1:16; 3:27). My baptism by water only foreshadows His baptism and the cleansing fire of the Holy Spirit.⁶ Having borne away the sins of His people, He will ascend to the right hand of His Father, from where He will send the Holy Spirit to earth as the crown of all new covenant blessings. My ministry is a limited blessing of the Spirit compared to His. My ministry is confined to the preparatory work of the Spirit as the forerunner of Christ; His ministry will know the superabounding fullness of the Spirit.⁷ When He sends His Spirit, He will then impart that same Spirit to thousands of people with all of the blessings which He purchased by His death upon the cross."

One of the crowning achievements of Christ's redemptive work is baptizing His people with the Holy Spirit. In his epistle to the Galatians, Paul writes, "Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith" (Gal. 3:13-14).

6. John Henry Burn, *A Homiletic Commentary on the Gospel according to St. Mark* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1892), 13.

7. R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Mark's Gospel* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1964), 41.

Christ's suffering and death prepared the way for His mighty act of pouring out the Holy Spirit. That is exactly what Peter preached on the day of Pentecost. Peter's audience asked, "What meaneth this?" (Acts 2:12). In other words, what did the extraordinary Pentecost spectacle of sight and sound signify? Peter replies, "Therefore being by the right hand of God exalted, and having received of the Father the promise of the Holy Ghost, he hath shed forth this, which ye now see and hear" (Acts 2:33).

The ascended Christ sent His Spirit down from heaven to dwell with and in the people of God and to conform them to the image of the Lord Jesus Christ. John baptized the physical body with water, but Jesus Christ baptizes the soul with the Holy Spirit. It is as if John is saying, "I bathe your bodies in water, not without divine authority or spiritual effect, but to prepare the way for one who is so far superior to me both in power and office that He will bathe your very souls in the effusion of the Holy Spirit."⁸

Consequently, Christ's Spirit *came* upon His followers (Acts 1:8); the Spirit was *poured out* on them (Acts 2:17); and the Spirit *fell* upon them (Acts 10:44). Every true believer is a recipient of this wonderful baptism, but on the day of Pentecost, John's prophecy was fulfilled in a special way. As Hendriksen says, "It was then that, through the coming of the Spirit, the minds of Christ's followers were enriched with unprecedented illumination (1 John 2:20); their wills strengthened, like never before, with contagious animation (Acts 4:13, 19, 20, 33, 5:29); and their hearts flooded with warm affection to a previously unprecedented degree (Acts 2:44–47; 3:6; 4:32)."⁹

Practical Applications

We can glean at least three practical applications from the life and preaching of John the Baptist.

8. Joseph Addison Alexander, *A Commentary on Mark*, Geneva Series of Commentaries (1858; repr., Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1960), 10.

9. Hendriksen, *Mark*, 41.

First, *we must seek Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit*. Baptism with water represents the washing away of our sins and the daily renewing of our lives, as the Spirit dwells in us, and sanctifies us to be members of Christ, and applies to us what we have in Christ. John tells us that Jesus came to fulfill His Father's glorious promises: "I [will] sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you" (Ezek. 36:25); "I will pour my Spirit upon thy seed, and my blessing upon thine offspring" (Isa. 44:3).

Baptism with water cannot save us. Adam plunged us into sin, and his pollution is passed down to us. Unless we are born again, we "cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). John freely admitted that he could only baptize with water, but the good news is that the Messiah comes and baptizes with the Holy Spirit. He will "put a new heart and a right spirit within you," so that you may be "followers of God, as dear children" (Eph. 5:1).

Dear friend, have you become a new creature in Christ Jesus by the baptism of His Holy Spirit? Do you have a new heart? Has the Spirit of God made you a partaker of the divine nature by His saving work, so that you have become teachable for the spiritual kingdom of Christ? Have you felt your need for Christ and fled to Him alone for salvation? Is He your only Prophet, Priest, and King?¹⁰ Do you rely on Christ alone for your salvation? Are you persevering in being a disciple of the Savior and His kingdom? By the Spirit's power, do you hate sin, flee wickedness, treasure Christ in His person and work, and perform those good works "which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them" (Eph. 2:10)? By the Spirit's power, do you "put off...the old man, which is corrupt according to the deceitful lusts...and [do you] put on the new man, which after God is created in righteousness and true holiness" (Eph. 4:22, 24)? By the Spirit's grace, do you

10. J. C. Ryle, *Mark*, Expository Thoughts on the Gospels (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1985), 5.

bow under the will of God and strive to speak, work, and suffer for the truth?¹¹

These graces are the fruits and evidences of the baptism of the Holy Spirit, to which even the extraordinary gifts given on the day of Pentecost must yield. For “whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease” (1 Cor. 13:8). Miracles are no longer necessary, but there is perpetual need for the saving ministry and fruits of the Holy Spirit—“love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Gal. 5:22–23). These gifts will never fail but will flourish forever in the kingdom of Christ and of God.¹²

Without the abiding presence and work of the Spirit in our lives, all of our religion is a sham. As Paul wrote to the Roman Christians, “If any man have not the Spirit of Christ, he is none of his” (Rom. 8:9). With the baptism of the Spirit, our hearts and lives are grounded in Christ to truly know, trust, love, and serve Him. By His Word and Holy Spirit, Christ will lead us to life everlasting (Ps. 23:6; cf. John 17:3). Dear friend, you must be born again! You must be baptized with the Holy Spirit! Water baptism is insufficient; only the baptism of the Holy Spirit will suffice—indeed, it will more than suffice (Acts 19:3–5).

Second, *we must seek grace to grow in Christ-appreciation and self-forgetfulness*. John’s words, clothing, and diet showed his remarkable humility. That is precisely what made John so effective. His life was a transcript of his sermons. As R. Kent Hughes writes, John “embodied” his own message; “in this sense he *was* the message!”¹³ John was not just delivering sermons; rather, he preached to himself as well as his audience, such that in preaching Christ as a menial servant or a mere voice in the wilderness,

11. Burn, *Homiletic Commentary*, 14.

12. John Bird Sumner, *A Practical Exposition of the Gospel According to St. Mark, in the Form of Lectures, Intended to Assist the Practice of Domestic Instruction and Devotion* (London: J. Hatchard and Son, 1847), 10–13.

13. R. Kent Hughes, *Mark, Volume One: Jesus, Servant and Savior*, Preaching the Word (Westchester, Ill.: Crossway, 1989), 21–22. Italics original.

his preaching was both powerful and contagious. His words rose from the depths of his being and were thoroughly sincere. As Phillips Brooks (1835–1893) observed, “Truth through personality is our description of real preaching. The truth must come really through the person, not merely over his lips, not merely into his understanding and out through his pen. It must come through his character, his affections, his whole intellectual and moral being. It must come genuinely through him.”¹⁴

Christ desires His people to be authentic disciples in the marketplace, at school, at work, and at home. Our lives should embody what we believe about God, man, Christ, salvation, the church, and the consummation of all things. Our spouses and children should see a beautiful humility in us that exalts Christ. They should be able to say of us, “Although my dad or mom or spouse or children or parents have sinful faults and flaws, yet one thing is certain: he or she loves the Lord Jesus Christ, and desires to magnify His worth and crown Him Lord of all.” Ask the Lord every day that the worthiness of Christ may exude from you. Like a person who works with lilies all day smells like lilies when he comes home, so may the aroma of Christ exude from you wherever you go. Do not rest short of being able to say with Paul, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21).

Third, *we must seek grace to let John’s attitude toward the world become ours*. By describing the lifestyle of John, Mark is saying that discipleship involves self-denial and distancing ourselves from the world (Mark 1:6).¹⁵ John’s dress and diet, together with his preaching and warnings against sin and his allurements to Christ, conveyed that he despised worldliness. Worldliness can be defined as *fallen human nature attempting to live without God*. People who are citizens of this world are controlled by worldly

14. Phillips Brooks, *Lectures on Preaching* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1877), 8. Capitalization modernized.

15. James A. Brooks, *Mark*, New American Commentary 23 (Nashville, Tenn.: B&H, 1991), 41.

pursuits. The quest for this world's trinity of pleasure, profit, and position consumes most of their time and energy.

John lived *in* the world but was not *of* the world (John 17:14–16). His life was not driven by the need to grasp more of what this world offers, but by the desire to have fellowship with the Father and the Son by the Spirit. His whole demeanor conveyed that he was a prophet who was always ready to depart to be with the Lord. He exemplified what the Lord Jesus said in Luke 12:35: “Let your loins be girded about, and your lights burning.”

Like John, are *you* ready for the Lord's return? Do you live in antithesis to this present evil age? If you live for this world, you are not prepared for the better world to come. As W. H. Griffith Thomas (1861–1924) says, “Worldliness is a spirit, an atmosphere, an influence permeating the whole of life and human society, and it needs to be guarded against constantly and strenuously.”¹⁶

Do you habitually yield to the spirit of self-seeking and self-indulgence, the spirit of fallen man, without regard for God? Or do you strive, by God's grace, to overcome the world by faith that resolves to deny yourself the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, and longs to rise above worldly circumstances? Do you possess the faith that overcomes the world? The apostle John writes, “Whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 John 5:4). Do not rest short of exercising God-given faith to deny the appeals of this world and to embrace the cleansing and baptizing power and directives of the Holy Spirit as recorded in God's Word. Remind yourself that you need Christ's baptism with the Holy Spirit. Seek grace to grow in Christ-appreciation and in self-forgetfulness. Then let John's attitude to the world become your own.¹⁷

16. Cited in John Blanchard, *The Complete Gathered Gold: A Treasury of Quotations for Christians* (Darlington, England: Evangelical Press, 2006), 682.

17. These two final paragraphs are adapted from Joel R. Beeke, *Overcoming the World: Grace to Win the Daily Battle* (Phillipsburg, N.J.: P&R, 2005), 16–17.

What Is the Gospel?

Dr. Brian G. Najapfour

Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received, and wherein ye stand; by which also ye are saved, if ye keep in memory what I preached unto you, unless ye have believed in vain. For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures.

—1 CORINTHIANS 15:1–4

It was in 1517 that Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses onto the door of the church in Wittenberg, Germany. As you know, this event triggered the Protestant Reformation, and at the very heart of this Reformation is the recovery of the gospel from the corrupt Roman Catholic Church.

You might ask, “What did the Roman Catholic Church do to the gospel?” The Roman Catholic Church distorted the gospel, and the gospel became so distorted that it could no longer be regarded as good news. In the Roman Catholic Church, the gospel is not good but, in fact, bad news. Why? Well, for instance, while Roman Catholics do not deny the necessity of faith in Christ, they add to that faith a list of works that one must do in order to be saved. The first in that list is baptism, without which no one can be saved, according to Roman Catholics. In their catechism we read, “The Lord Himself affirms that baptism is necessary for salvation. The church does not know of any means other than

baptism that assures entry into eternal bliss.” Then their catechism adds, “All men may attain salvation through faith, baptism, and the observance of the commandments.” This is indicative of the Roman Catholic “gospel”—and it is not good news; it is bad news. Why? Because if salvation or entrance into eternal joy is through faith, baptism, and the observance of the law, then who can be saved? Who can keep God’s law perfectly, and how do you know if you have kept God’s law sufficiently to attain eternal life from God? And, since you cannot know, you obviously cannot have assurance of salvation. Therefore, the kind of gospel that you find in the Roman Catholic Church is not the true gospel but another “gospel.” We recall that the apostle Paul says in Galatians 1:8, “But though we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel unto you than that which we have preached unto you, let him be accursed,” or anathema. Here you see how Paul takes the gospel seriously, because it is a matter of life and death. It is a matter of eternal life and eternal death, heaven and hell.

Do you take the gospel seriously? The question however is, what is the gospel? In response, let me first define the gospel, then, second, give you six elements of the gospel, and finally conclude with the proper response to the gospel.

What is the Gospel?

Let’s answer this deep question.

Many people today unfortunately talk about the gospel, but do not really understand or know what it is. They have a distorted or over-simplified understanding of the gospel, and that is why it is crucial that we define the gospel.

Let’s return to our text, where we read that word “gospel” (1 Cor. 15:1). There Paul says to his fellow believers, “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you *the* gospel which I preached unto you.” The Greek word for gospel here is *euaggelion*, which means *good message*. And with the definite article “the,” Paul wants to make it clear that there is only one good message. If the apostle Paul had said, “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you *a* gospel,”

then we would not have a problem or conflict today with other religions. If there is no absolute or definite gospel message, then every other message about salvation offered by any other religion is not necessarily wrong. But what we have here in our passage is not *a* gospel, but *the* gospel, and thus any message that contradicts the message of the cross is a false message. There cannot be two gospels; there is only one gospel.

Of course, advocates of religious pluralism would object to this claim and argue that all religions are equally true and that there are many ways to God. Once on a trip to Iowa to preach, I sat next to a passenger who was originally from Japan. The Lord opened an opportunity for me to share the gospel with him. When I asked him about Jesus, he said to me, “Yes, I have heard about Jesus.” He said, “Jesus is one of the many ways towards eternal joy”—one of the many ways. I said, “No, no! He is *the* only way!—the only way to eternal joy.” Jesus Himself makes that exclusive claim in John 14:6. “I am *the* way, *the* truth, and *the* life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”

Having said that and established that there is only one gospel, we have not yet answered the question, what is that one gospel? Interestingly, in Mark 1:15, Jesus says, “Repent ye, and believe in the gospel,” with the implication that you will be saved. So in this context, if you were to ask Jesus, “Lord, please tell me what I must do to be saved,” His answer would be, “Repent, and believe in the gospel, and you will be saved.” In Acts 16:30–31, when the Philippian jailer asked Paul and Silas, “What must I do to be saved?” Paul and Silas simply replied, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved.” Now notice, they did not say, “Believe in the gospel”; instead, they said, “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ.” In Mark 1:15, Jesus did not say, “Believe on me and you will be saved.” Instead, He said, “Believe in the gospel.” So here we see that to believe in the gospel and to believe on Jesus Christ are essentially the same. Why? Because the gospel *is* the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ is the gospel. That is why, if you were to ask me, “Pastor Brian, can you please define the gospel to me in a sentence,

just in a simple way? What is the gospel?”—then I would say that the gospel, simply put, is the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the essence of the gospel. The gospel centers on His person and on His work.

Six Elements of the Gospel

Now I will give you the six elements of the gospel.

We see the first one in verse 3 of our passage, 1 Corinthians 15. “For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures.” The first element of the gospel is the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. Notice what Paul says here in verse 3. “Christ died for our sins”—not for His sins, because Jesus never sinned, but for our sins, as the prophet Isaiah says: “But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities” (Isa. 53:5). We should have been the ones to die on Calvary. Why? Because we are the ones who offended God. We are the ones who transgressed God’s law. We are the ones who sinned against God. But Jesus died in our place. He died as our substitute. Remember the story of Abraham in Genesis 22. God asked Abraham to offer his son Isaac as a burnt offering on Mount Moriah. Abraham obeyed, but as he stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son, the angel of the Lord stopped him. “Do not lay your hand on your son,” said the angel of the Lord, and God provided a substitute for Isaac, a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. Abraham then offered that ram in place of his son Isaac. Fast forward to Mount Golgotha: there was no voice to stop the Father from bruising His only-begotten Son. Even the angels did not say, “Stop! Stop! Don’t lay your hand on your only-begotten Son! Don’t!” There was no voice. Why? Because Jesus was the substitute. There was no other substitute, because He was *the* substitute. He was the Lamb of God slain for our sins. God spared Abraham’s son Isaac, but at Calvary God did not spare His own Son, because it was the only way that He could spare you and me. And thus, this beautiful hymn:

Bearing shame and scoffing rude,
In my place condemned He stood,
Sealed my pardon with His blood:
Hallelujah, what a Savior!

Jesus died for our sins. That's the first element of the gospel: His death.

The second element is His burial. Look at 1 Corinthians 15:4: "And that he was buried." In the Heidelberg Catechism, Lord's Day 16, we have this beautiful question (41): "Why was Jesus buried?" Have you ever thought about that question? Why was Jesus buried? We have this answer: "His burial testifies that He really died." Jesus was buried, and His burial proves that He really died on the cross for our sins. Why is that important? Because, for instance, Muslims do not believe that Jesus died on the cross. According to their Quran, it was not really Jesus who was crucified, but only a resemblance of Him. Our passage clearly asserts the contrary: "He was buried." He was buried, confirming His death, and Paul says that Christ died "according to the scriptures." We know that God's Word would not tell a lie. If God's Word says that Jesus died on the cross, we must believe it.

The third element of the gospel: Christ's resurrection. Look at verse 4, the second half: "and that he rose again the third day according to the scriptures." We know that Christ's resurrection shows that He has overcome death. That is why Paul can say, "O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory?... Thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor. 15:55, 57). Because Jesus rose from the dead, now we have victory over our last enemy—namely, death. Death no longer has dominion over us. Death cannot separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus. In fact, for us believers in Christ, death is now a blessing. Death is like an airplane that will transport you to the very presence of the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus rose from the grave, the firstfruits of our resurrection, Paul says (1 Cor. 15:20).

So death, burial, and resurrection. Added to these three elements are three more following: first, Christ's birth. We read in Luke 2:10, "And the angel said unto them [that is, to the shepherds], Fear not:"—why?—"for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy." This is the same as saying: "I bring you the gospel." And what is the gospel all about? The angel continues: "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." So, the gospel is also about the birth of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Jesus was born not just to die for our sins but also to live a perfect life on our behalf. In theology, we call this the twofold obedience of Christ—it was both passive and active. That word *passive* does not mean that Christ was idle and listless; it comes from the Latin word *passio*, which means suffering. So, when you say the passive obedience of Jesus, you are talking about His suffering—that He suffered, that He died, to pay the penalty of our disobedience, of our sins—"for the wages of sin is death" (Rom. 6:23).

But if the gospel story ended there, we would all still be in trouble. No one can stand before a holy, just, and righteous God. Let me illustrate my point here. Imagine someone who is going to an important interview for a job. But right before he walks into the building, a truck drives past him and splatters him with mud. Now his suit and long-sleeved shirt are filthy. So, he decides to first head home and take his dirty suit and shirt off. Now he is clean. But that does not really solve his problem. He still cannot return and have the interview. He needs a new shirt and suit jacket to clothe him.

In this analogy, the removal of his dirty suit is a symbol of the forgiveness of our sins. John the Beloved says that the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all our sins (1 John 1:7). Through the atoning blood, through the atoning death, of the Lord Jesus Christ, we have been forgiven. Our sins are taken and buried in the blood of Jesus Christ. That's His passive obedience. He died for the forgiveness of our sins.

But if the gospel story ended there, as I said, then no one could stand before this holy, just God. Why? Because we remain naked. We need a new robe. Putting on a new jacket is a symbol of the imputation of Christ's righteousness to him, received by faith. That's the blessing of active obedience: in it, Christ weaves a robe of righteousness to give to us. In other words, Jesus was born not just to die on the cross to pay for the penalty of our sins, but also to keep God's law perfectly. He was born to obey that perfect righteousness which we all need, without which no one can stand before God—because, by nature, the righteousness that we have is as a filthy rag, Isaiah says (Isa. 64:6). It stinks before God. Even your best performance, even your best religious works before God, stink. You and I need the righteousness of the Lord Jesus Christ. And praise the Lord, Christ was born to live a holy life. He kept all the commandments of God on behalf of His people, so that when you believe on Jesus that righteousness will be imputed to you, and on the basis of that righteousness, now you can stand before this holy, just, righteous God. Now you can stand as if you had not sinned before and as if you yourself had kept God's law perfectly. On the basis of that righteousness, God can declare you righteous and just. In fact, Paul puts it this way in 2 Corinthians 5:21: "For [God the Father] hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." Think about that. Because of the active obedience of Jesus Christ, we have become the righteousness of God. Praise God! As Isaiah says, "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God...for he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness" (Isa. 61:10). That is our comfort in life—that we have both the passive and active obedience of Jesus Christ.

Charles Spurgeon, the so-called "Prince of Preachers," championed the passive obedience of Christ. Towards the end of his life, he said, "My theology is very simple. I can express it in a few words and they are enough to die by: 'Jesus died for me.'" That was Spurgeon's theology. And here the focus is on the passive obedience of Christ: He died to pay the penalty of my sins.

Unfortunately, sometimes in the presentation of the gospel, the focus is merely on the passive obedience, not His active obedience. Focus on Christ's suffering is wonderful! But we also need His righteousness. We need His active obedience. And others have focused upon this, such as Gresham Machen, the founder of Westminster Theological Seminary and a founder of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church. Shortly before his death, he sent a telegram to his friend John Murray. The words of the telegram were these: "I am so thankful for the active obedience of Christ—no hope without it." Those were his last recorded words. He died at the age of fifty-five. "I am so thankful for the active obedience of Christ—no hope without it," that Jesus did it for me. I failed to meet God's perfect demands, but I have Jesus who did it on my behalf. Now, by faith, I have His perfect obedience, His perfect righteousness; and on that basis, when God the Father looks at me, He cannot condemn me anymore. What He sees in me is the righteousness of His Son, and therefore what God the Father said of His Son at the Jordan River, He also says of me in Christ: "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased" (Matt. 3:17). That is hard to think about, that is, that God is well pleased in me. It is not, of course, because of who I am by nature or because of what I do or what I have done, but it is only because of Christ in me—because of His righteousness.

So, Spurgeon focused on the passive obedience of Jesus, whereas Machen finds comfort in the active obedience of Jesus. We need both, of course, but sometimes we find more joy in the active obedience of Jesus (that Jesus did it all for me) and sometimes in His passive obedience (that He died to pay the penalty of my sins). He was born not just to die but also to live a perfect life.

The fifth element of the gospel: Christ's ascension. Romans 8:34 says, "Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us." Jesus ascended into heaven. And what is He doing there? He is sitting at the right hand of God the Father Almighty. Paul says that He is making intercession for

us. Jesus is praying for me. And if you are a believer in Christ, you can say the same, that Jesus is praying for you. What a joy, what a comfort, what an encouragement that I have Jesus who constantly and unceasingly prays for me, making intercession for me! Robert Murray M'Cheyne once said, "If I could hear Christ praying for me in the next room, I would not fear a million enemies. Yet distance makes no difference. He is praying for me." I tell you, this is one of my sources for assurance of salvation. Ask me, how do I know that I will make it to the end? How do I know that I will see Jesus someday face to face? How do I rest in that with confidence and full assurance? It is because of Jesus, who is making intercession for me. My assurance of salvation does not depend on my prayers for myself, because I fail as a Christian. But I have Jesus, the great High Priest, who always, always prays for me, even when I am sleeping and even when I am, unfortunately, sinning. When I am sinning, Jesus is praying for me, and that is the only reason why even sin cannot snatch me out of the hand of Jesus, that even Satan cannot take me away from the presence of Jesus: it is because He is praying for me.

Christ's birth, His death, His burial, His resurrection, His ascension, and now finally the last element of the gospel: His second coming. In John 14:3, Jesus says, "And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also." Don't we long to be with Jesus? Don't we want to be with Jesus right now? There is a sense that our worship service every Sunday is just virtual, because we don't really see Jesus face to face. Yes, He is present with us through His Spirit; but the truth remains that, bodily speaking, He is absent from us. He is with His Father, but He makes this beautiful promise that He will come again. Why? To receive us to Himself, so that where He is, there we may be also. We will be able to see Jesus, hug Him and kiss Him, the one who died for us.

These are the six elements of the gospel. They are like six rings forming a chain. I call this the glorious chain of the gospel, and each element is inseparably connected to each of the others—you

cannot separate one from another. Paul says to the Corinthian church, “This is what I declare unto you.” And we pastors, we elders, we deacons, we Christians, we who claim to be Christians: this is the message that we need to declare to the world, that Jesus was born, He died, He was buried, He rose again from the dead, He ascended, and He is coming again. This is the gospel. Paul says in Romans 1:16, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.” Why? “For it is the power of God unto salvation to everyone that believeth.” The gospel is God’s *dunamis*, a Greek word from which we get the English word dynamite. Paul is saying, “This is the *dunamis* of God.” The gospel is so powerful. Once lit by the Holy Spirit, and once it explodes, it will change you, it will transform you. There is no way that you will not feel the explosion of the *dunamis* of the gospel. It will change you. It changed the life of the apostle Paul. Remember, before his conversion he was going to persecute the church and kill Christians. But when he encountered Jesus, when he encountered the gospel which is Jesus, he became a completely different person. From being a persecutor, Saul became Paul; he became a proclaimer and preacher of the gospel of Christ. It was a day-to-night change, from darkness to light, a radical change.

I say this to you, by the grace of God, that the same gospel changed my life. We sang the song by Katherine Hankey, “I love to tell the story.” This is the old, old story that we ought to be sharing with others. And we don’t need to add gimmicks to it. You don’t need to add drama to it. Just preach and proclaim the plain simple message of the cross. Yes, it is simple; and yet it is profound, that whoever believes in Jesus shall not perish but have everlasting life.

The Proper Response to the Gospel

As we conclude, what should be our proper response to this gospel? Let’s go back to our text, 1 Corinthians 15:1. Paul says, “Moreover, brethren, I declare unto you the gospel which I preached unto you, which also ye have received.” Notice this last part: “which you have received.” This is our proper response

to the gospel. We must receive the gospel by faith. Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 1:15, “This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief.” Literally, this verse reads this way: “Faithful is *the* Word.” The King James translates it as “faithful is the saying,” but it is actually *logos* in the original. “Faithful is *the* Word,” *the logos*, “and worthy of all acceptance.” In other words, what Paul is saying is this: “This *logos*, this faithful *logos*, Jesus, the living Word, and the gospel, the risen Word, this *logos* is worthy of all acceptance. It deserves full acceptance, not partial.” And, that term “accept” is a biblical expression. We Reformed people tend to be allergic to it. “No, you don’t accept Jesus; you don’t accept the gospel.” What Paul just told us is that this gospel is worthy of all acceptance. We need to recover that term from those who have misused it. We need to embrace the gospel fully. Full acceptance of the full gospel. We need to accept this complete, full Christ. St. Augustine of Hippo once said, “If you believe what you like in the gospel and reject what you don’t like, it is not the gospel you believe but yourself.” You don’t pick and choose. You either accept the gospel fully or not.

Perhaps you are saying, “I don’t need the gospel. Why are you talking about the gospel? I am already a Christian. The gospel is for unbelievers. I am hoping to hear a different message, not the gospel! Preach it to unbelievers!” You are wrong, my friend! I cannot imagine my Christian life without the gospel. How often I get discouraged in the ministry, or as a husband and a father of five children. Where do I find my comfort? In the gospel! In the gospel. That is why Robert Murray M’Cheyne once said, “For every look at yourself take ten looks at Christ.” We must do this because if we focus on ourselves, we will get discouraged, because we fail and struggle with sin—yes, even we believers in Christ stumble, sin, and offend the Lord. There were times in my life that I would say, “Why did I do it again?!” I was so disappointed in myself. I had repented of that sin, and I said, “How did I do it again?!” You are so disappointed in yourself, and yet, thankfully, we have Jesus

Christ, where we find our identity. I don't find comfort in myself, because I am not consistently faithful as a father or as a husband or as a pastor. I find my joy in my identity in Christ, that He died for me, that He lived a perfect life on my behalf, that He is my Lord and Savior, that I belong to Him—and that He belongs to me.

So we need the gospel. Someone said, "There are two parts to the gospel: the first part is believing it, and the second part is behaving it." We Christians ought to behave according to the gospel. We need to be gospel-minded, saturated with it. Again I say to you, the gospel is Christ. We need to be like Jesus Christ, because that is the ultimate goal of redemption. God did not save us just for the sake of saving us. He saved us so that we might become more and more like His Son Jesus Christ. That will happen in full when Jesus returns, according to John the Beloved, when we see Jesus face to face. We shall be like Him. Hallelujah! Praise the Lord! Too good to be true! The time will come that I will be like Jesus. You will not be able to find any mistakes in me anymore. I will be like Jesus.

But here in this life, in the meantime, we need to be gospel-saturated. We need to smell like the gospel so that the people around us will see the gospel in us. That is a good, good tool in evangelism, especially when you are not allowed to talk about the gospel, such as in the workplace—let your life speak the gospel to them. Let them see Christ in you. Take, for example, this illustration: A missionary approached a native whom he had not seen before and asked, "Have you ever heard the gospel?" "No," he replied, "but I have seen it with my own eyes. I know a man who used to be the terror of the neighborhood. He was a bad opium smoker and as dangerous as a wild beast, but he became completely changed. He is now gentle and good. He has left off opium. I saw the gospel in this neighbor."

May I ask you with love, husbands, when your wives look at you, do they see the gospel in you? Fathers, when your children look at you, do they see Christ in you? Students, do your fellow students see Christ in you at school? If you are working, do your

fellow workers smell the gospel in you? Maybe there is no change in your life; you remain the same person. Could it be because you have not yet received the gospel?

In Romans 1:16, Paul says, “For I am not ashamed of the gospel of Christ.” But then when he wrote to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:1, he said to him, “Thou therefore, my son, be strong in the grace that is in Christ Jesus.” “Remember that Jesus Christ of the seed of David was raised from the dead”—note this now, please; don’t miss this—“according to my gospel” (v. 8). That’s quite something. Earlier Paul said, “This is the gospel of Christ,” but then he said to Timothy, “Remember that Jesus Christ...was raised from the dead according to my gospel.” Now Paul owns the gospel. In other words, he has come to embrace the gospel experientially, so that the gospel becomes his. “This is my gospel,” which really is a matter of saying, “Christ is mine.” Can you say the same thing? Can you say, “That gospel is actually mine, because that gospel has changed my life; I have felt the transforming, saving, sanctifying power of the gospel of Jesus Christ”?

