



Colossians 2:13–15

13 When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

Reflection

What is the gospel? Now, at one level for a Christian this is a very easy question to answer. I read a book recently by Greg Gilbert who compared asking a Christian ‘What is the gospel?’ with asking a carpenter the question, ‘What is a hammer?’ After all the gospel stands at the very centre of Christianity, as Christians we claim to be about the gospel above all else. It’s what we intend to build our lives upon, what we build our churches around; it’s what we speak to others about and what we pray they also will hear and believe.

But when it comes to actually articulating the gospel message, it’s easy to come up short. I recently led a bible study group in

which I asked several mature Christians in their late thirties to explain the gospel; and it proved a surprisingly difficult exercise. I think this is in part due to the fact that no one bible verse or passage seems to encapsulate the whole gospel. We have many excellent verses, but unless they're all added together, we don't get the full picture. For example, one might reach for the famous John 3:16,

16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

This verse provides an excellent summary of the gospel, it provides the broad details, is founded on God's love ('For God so loved'), and hints at sin and judg-

ment ('shall not perish'), grace ('he gave') and faith ('whoever believes'). But when pressed, much of the details are missing, for example: the cross, resurrection, Jesus' defeat of Satan, sin and death, the gift of the Holy Spirit etc.

Probably the best place to turn to understand the gospel of Jesus Christ is the book of Romans. Many believe it to be the fullest gospel presentation in the Bible. A condensed version is found in Romans 1:18–3:31 or an even more distilled gospel summary in Romans 3:21–26, considered by many to be the most important paragraph penned by humankind.

But another great gospel presentation is found in today's passage in Colossians 2:11–15. I particularly love this passage

because of the way it ties the benefits of the gospel to our union with Christ and reminds us that the cross is so much bigger than just our individual salvation. As I read it now, listen out for the ‘in him’ and ‘with him’ language and also the cosmic significance of what occurred at Calvary,

11 In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ, 12 having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him through your faith in the working of God, who raised him from the dead.¹³ When you were dead in your sins and in the uncircumcision of your flesh, God made

you alive with Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

It is an extraordinary fact to fully grasp, but through our faith in Jesus Christ, and his Holy Spirit who comes to live inside of every Christian, we actually participate in the events of the cross. In the language of our passage, just as the Jewish rite of circumcision severed the flesh as an outward sign of faith in God, at the death of Jesus Christ our sinful human flesh, our

sinful nature, was inwardly cut away by the power of the Holy Spirit, and we died to our former way of life. Continuing with Jewish religious rites, Paul says that were we buried with Jesus in baptism, which symbolises at once the movement of being brought from death to life and our sins being washed away. Spiritually we were not only buried with Christ, but raised with him through faith in God who raised Jesus from the dead. Paul then gives a technical definition of the mechanics of our salvation in verses 13 to 15. These verses provide a great, detailed gospel summary. Let's read them again and then pull them apart more fully,

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Christ. He forgave us all our sins, 14 having cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness, which stood against us and condemned us; he has taken it away, nailing it to the cross. 15 And having disarmed the powers and authorities, he made a public spectacle of them, triumphing over them by the cross.

We were dead in our sins, but through faith given to us by the Holy Spirit we became united with Christ. Our union with him made us spiritual participants in what happened to Jesus on the cross, the twin centres of which is the language of verse 14 and verse 15. Essentially two things happened on the cross, one, verse fourteen, God 'cancelled the charge of our legal indebtedness' – the penalty that we owed

for our sins – and two, verse fifteen, Jesus ‘disarmed the powers and authorities’ (Satan and his demons), which we often express as defeating Satan, sin and death.

So putting these emphases of our passage together – our union with Christ, this language of legal indebtedness, and cosmic triumph – the mechanics of the gospel can be expressed in the following way:

All of humankind have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. God loves us beyond all imagining but because of his righteous character and his perfect nature, he cannot leave sin unpunished. And the penalty for sin is death. Death has thus reigned in our world since the time of Adam, when Satan tempted Adam and sin entered our world. Satan and his demons have ruled

our sin tainted earth ever since. But something had to give. For God to remain God he had to punish our sin; his forbearance, his grace in holding off judgment could only last so long, he had to act consistent with his character. But God's character is one of both righteous and love. And so acting out of both his righteousness and his love, God sent Jesus Christ, who was both fully God and fully man, to die a substitutionary death in our place. When we repent of our sins and trust Jesus to save us, when we place our faith in him alone, we become united to him, and a magnificent exchange takes place. All our sin, rebellion, and wickedness is imputed (or credited) to Jesus, it's charged to his account, and he dies because of it, on our behalf and in our place. And at the same time, the perfect life Jesus lived is imput-

ed to us, and we are declared righteous. God looks at us, and instead of seeing our sin, he sees Jesus' righteousness, and forgiven by God, and united with Christ, we too will receive the blessings of his perfect life; we will rise from the dead and live eternally with God in heaven just as Christ has paved the way for us in doing. Satan and his demons threw everything at Jesus to try and stop him from reaching the cross but to no avail. And now, through the church, Jesus' triumph echoes into the heavenly realms having loosed the chains of death, defeated Satan, and begun reclaiming earth for the kingdom of God. This is the good news of the gospel. The centre of the Christian faith which Paul so eloquently reminds the Colossians of in today's passage.

Think & Pray

Our sinful nature has been crucified with Jesus. Our sins, as Paul says, have been nailed to the cross. Our charge of legal indebtedness has been eternally wiped away by the one who knew no sin but who became sin for us. God's majesty is fully and finally revealed on the cross where, impossibly, his justice and mercy have met, setting us free from Satan, sin and death forever! We have so much to rejoice in as we continue 2,000 years on to marvel at the cross of Jesus Christ. Praise God today in prayer for what he has done in Jesus and pray that united to him we would continue to live in him and walk in step with him as we go about our day today.