

Gripped by the Gospel

Living With Forever In Mind – Part II

Romans 1:16b

Introduction

Have you ever read a book and then described to a friend, “I was gripped by that book . . . I couldn’t put it down.”

Have you ever watched a movie or a live play and found yourself utterly gripped by the unfolding drama. Have you ever listened to a symphony orchestra play such beautiful music that you did not want to breathe; you were mesmerized by the score.

There are certain things in life that can grip us. In fact, we tend to define life in terms of those things that control us, and some are not so positive. It might be the grip of your assignment at work or school. Perhaps you are building a house or starting a new job or business. These things seem to dominate everything in life and any conversation with you will involve, at some point, a discussion about that chapter in your life.

Some are in the middle of raising small children and one day blurs into the next; there is one diaper pail after another. I can well remember that moment when our twins were less than a year old and Marsha and I discovered that she was expecting again. That was quite a moment. I would leave for the office, leaving behind a mother and three children under the age of two. When I left the house I tried not to look too happy! We had a little ritual we would go through before I left for work. As we kissed, “Goodbye,” I would ask her, “And what are your plans for today?”

She would respond with one word, “Survive.”

She did that wonderfully well, I might add. Certain seasons of life, such as that, tend to dominate our thinking and our energy.

Perhaps, for some, the dominating passion in life is some revolutionary idea or philosophy. I read recently, in a book by Ravi Zacharias, about the dominating energy and misguided passion in the life of Joseph Stalin. Ravi was in the home of Malcolm Muggeridge, a brilliant journalist of the twentieth century, who relayed an event to Ravi.

Muggeridge said that, on one occasion, he was visited by Svetlana Stalin, sometime after the death of her father, Joseph. On three different occasions, during her prolonged visit, Svetlana talked of her father’s death. Stalin was a small man, about five-foot-four, and not very imposing. However, he was a man of steel in terms of personal godless ambition. His daughter wanted to know if Muggeridge could explain why her father had done something very peculiar on his deathbed.

Svetlana said that just before Stalin died, he sat up in his bed, clenched his fists towards the heavens, then threw himself back on his pillow and died. Muggeridge explained her father’s hatred of God and His Word. Stalin had followed other leaders who constantly shook their fists, as it were, in the face of God. Stalin himself, obliterated fifteen million of his own people who refused the communist party line. On his deathbed, the man who called himself “steel,” or “Stalin,” which was not his given name, shook his fist in the face of God and continued to reject the truth of heaven.

What a difference there is in being gripped by some self-centered philosophy instead of the

liberating gospel truth. My friends, if you want to live with forever in mind; in fact, if you want to get a grip on life in general, the next few verses in Romans, chapter 1, provide the life-changing, life-consuming formula.

Paul writes, in verses 16 and 17,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it . . .

(the gospel, that is),

. . . the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, “But the righteous man shall live by faith.”

Paul was consumed by the gospel. It was his life; it was his every breath. He says emphatically, “For I am not ashamed.”

Why would he say that? Because the Romans would be prone to wonder and because Paul himself, had been intimidated at times, such as in Corinth.

He is telling them that he is not ashamed. This is similar to telling someone, “Now, I’m telling you the truth.”

Why would you say that? Because the one you are talking to might think you are going to lie, right? Or because you might be in a situation where telling the truth will not be easy.

Paul was coming to a city gripped by . . .

Of all the places in the world to be intimidated, frightened, and anxious to stand for Christ, it would be in Rome.

With its polytheism, the gospel would meet its greatest religious test in Rome.

With its imperialism, its worship of Caesar, the gospel would meet its greatest political test in Rome.

With its paganism, the gospel would meet its greatest moral test in Rome.ⁱ

The Romans believed that Zeus was the creator and giver of life. They believed that Zeus miraculously caused the birth of his son Dionysius. When Dionysius was killed by the Titans, Zeus, in effect, resurrected him from the dead. He then incinerated the Titans and, from their ashes, created humanity.

Dionysius, the son of Zeus, came to become the god of celebration or the god of wine. In fact, an entire religious system saturated the Greek and

Roman world with its belief in Dionysius, who was, in reality, the god of drunkenness and revelry. All sorts of perversions came under the “umbrella” of this false god.

The worshipers of Dionysius, one commentator wrote,

[committed atrocities with human organs; they engaged in orgies of sexual perversions, along with music and dancing and feasting. They built the great temples to Dionysius where they carried on their orgies. In the very center of the temple in Damascus, whose ruins can still be seen to this day, there is a decorated area in the center of a large room that includes a deep pit – the hole was built and beautifully decorated, but it was for nothing less than a place where the drunken worshippers could come from their feasting and revelry and literally vomit as if they were offering a sacrifice to their god of wine, and they would then return to indulge themselves all over again.]ⁱⁱ

What do you bring to a world like that? It is a world filled with utter wickedness and depravity; a world where worship involved and welcomed sexual perversion; a world where drunkenness was encouraged; a world where self-centeredness was an attribute to be admired; a world where the gods were as wicked and sinful as the people; a world obsessed with its lusts and evil desires.

Five “C’s” of the gospel

What do you bring to a world like that? You bring the same thing that you bring to your world today – that is, the gospel. Let me give you the five “C’s” of the gospel.

The gospel’s Creator

1. First, you declare that the gospel’s Creator is God. The gospel is spiritual.

Paul has already discussed this truth earlier in Romans, chapter 1, when he wrote, in verses 1b through 2, that this was the,

. . . gospel of God, which He promised beforehand through His prophets in the holy Scriptures

And, in verses 3 and 4, this was the gospel of,

. . . His Son, who was born of a descendant of David according to the flesh, who was

declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, . . . Jesus Christ our Lord

No Roman god had any truly good news for humanity. In fact, the gods seemed as lost and wicked and uncertain as humanity.

This God, however, the true and living God, had a “gospel,” or, in the Greek, a “*euaggelion*,” meaning a, “good news”.

The gospel might be intimidating; it might be offensive; it might be considered foolishness, but to the one who is sick of sin; to the one who is laden down with guilt; to the one who senses that there is something more to life than self, the gospel is good news of sin washed away; guilt removed; scarlet stains on the soul and heart, made as white as wool.

The gospel’s creator is God.

The gospel’s character

2. Secondly, the gospel’s character is power. That is, the gospel is operational!

Paul wrote, in verse 16a,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God . . .

Paul says, in this verse, that the gospel is the power of God, which is the “*dunamis*” in the Greek, meaning the, “dynamite” or the “dynamic” of God. He did not say that the gospel contains power nor that the gospel needs to be accompanied with power.

What the world considers absurdity; what the world considers foolishness is, in fact, the power by which God transforms men and women and takes them from the kingdom of darkness and brings them into the kingdom of light.

Paul wrote in I Corinthians, chapter 1, verse 18, . . . ***the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.***

Peter wrote in I Peter, chapter 2, verse 9,

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, . . . a people for God’s own possession, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light

It is no wonder that the Thessalonians, after hearing the gospel, according to I Thessalonians, chapter 1, verses 9b through 10a,

. . . turned to God from idols to serve a living and true God, and to wait for His son from heaven . . .

The gospel’s confrontation

3. Thirdly, the gospel’s confrontation is that it calls mankind from sin unto salvation. The gospel is not only spiritual and operational, it is also transformational!

The gospel is not a self-help process. It is not a “three steps to a better self-image,” or a “nine ways to feel good about the world” process. The gospel confronts the unbeliever with his sin and calls him to salvation.

Terms like “salvation” and “being saved” are droll; they are ludicrous to the natural mind because it smacks against the pride of the human heart. You might hear, “What do you mean I’m a sinner?! What do you mean I need to be rescued from hell? I’m all for turning over a new leaf and trying to be nicer to people on the freeway, but this idea of depravity and sin and judgment and redemption, that’s not for me.”

The first century society would mock Christianity for the same things. The idea of sinful humanity being redeemed by a God who sacrificed Himself for the world was ludicrous to their minds. A god who was killed by humans could not be a true god.

Archeologists, digging among the ancient ruins of Rome, discovered a mural that scorned the Christians for this very idea of redemption. It depicted a common slave bowing down before a cross with a donkey hanging on it. The caption read, “Alexamenos worships his god.”

Christianity was considered the belief of fools. One writer, named Celsus, wrote a letter, in which he said, “Let no cultured person draw near, none wise, none sensible; but if any is wanting in sense and culture, if any is a fool, let him come to Christianity.”

He compared Christians to a swarm of bats, to ants crawling out of their nests, to frogs holding a meeting in the swamp and to worms crawling in the mud.ⁱⁱⁱ

What is at the heart of this derision, this mockery? It is the confrontation of the gospel that calls mankind sinful and in need of salvation.

The word Paul uses in Romans, chapter 1, verse 16, is “salvation,” or “*soteria*” in the Greek. He uses the noun nineteen times in his letters, with five of the references being in the letter to the Romans. The word speaks of rescuing the helpless; it refers to

deliverance from the penalty of sin, which is eternal death and separation from God in the place of torment, called hell.

Salvation is not a term we devised, but is a biblical term, inspired in the heart of Paul, by the Holy Spirit. Salvation is the hand of God reaching down to lost humanity of rescuing those who believe.

The salvation of God was first preached in the New Testament dispensation in Acts, chapter 2, where Peter, we are told in verse 40,

... solemnly testified and kept on exhorting them, saying, "Be saved from this perverse generation!"

Any true preacher of the gospel says basically the same thing, even two thousand years later.

In Matthew, chapter 18, verse 11b, we are told that Jesus Christ,

... has come to save that which was lost.

In fact, the angel delivered a message to Joseph on the night recorded for us in Matthew, chapter 1, verse 21, and told him that Mary would bear a son and His name would be called Jesus, or deliverer. Why? Because,

... He will save His people from their sins.

Paul repeated that in I Timothy, chapter 1, verse 15,

It is a trustworthy statement, deserving full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners . . .

That is why the world does not like the term "salvation," or "saved," because it is offensive; it is confrontational; it does not speak of a dose of self-help, it speaks of total depravity, sinfulness, and being lost. The human heart does not like that message!

When you are driving your car along the road, you might see a sign that says, "Slow, curve," and it displays a picture of a curving line. You can do one of three things:

- You can receive the message of that sign and immediately slow down. In that case, you have believed the message and have accepted it as truth.
- You can reject the message and think, "Why do they keep putting signs up along the road? Don't people have anything better to do?" and maintain your current rate of speed.

- You can also rebel against the sign and increase your speed, thinking, "I'll show that sign."

My friend, the truth remains that no matter how you respond to that sign, the curve in the road is just ahead. You can believe it, ignore it, reject it, or rebel against it.

My friend, have you been saved? Have you accepted this plan of salvation, by admitting that you are lost and sinful? Have you admitted that you must be redeemed, by placing your trust and faith in the work of Christ alone, who died on the cross to pay for your sins? Have you, a guilty sinner, come to Him and asked Him to deliver you, to save you by His power alone?

If you have not, I am here to confront you with the truth of the gospel. Believe the gospel and you will be saved.

Let me speak as a signpost of warning. Judgment is coming. Refuse the gospel and you will not be lost, you will remain lost. Refuse the gospel and you will walk in spiritual darkness until, one day, you will be given what you have chosen – eternal darkness.

Now, someone in Rome might have asked, "Is this salvation for me too? Oh, you don't know the things I've done. Is this gospel message for me?"

The gospel's call

4. Paul goes on to give them, and us, the gospel's call. The gospel's call is universal!

Paul wrote two important words in verse 16,

... the gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to everyone . . .

Now, he will clarify these words in the next phrase, by giving the condition of the gospel. But, for now, the gospel is delivered to everyone.

Catch the passion of Paul in verse 14,

I am under obligation both to Greeks and to barbarians, both to the wise and to the foolish.

Paul is saying, in effect, "I don't know if anyone will believe, but I want everyone to hear!"

The call of the gospel is to everyone.

As John, chapter 3, verse 16, tells us,

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

Acts, chapter 2, verse 21, says,

. . . everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

And, Revelation, chapter 22, verse 17, also tells us,

. . . Let the one who hears say, "Come." And let the one who is thirsty come; let the one who wishes take the water of life without cost.

The invitation of the gospel is universal and unlimited.

Paul states, in the last part of verse 16, that the gospel invitation goes to Jew and Gentile alike. Many have misinterpreted the phrase, "to the Jew first," to mean that efforts to reach the Jew with the gospel today must be given first priority. They do not understand the fact that Paul is speaking chronologically. They misunderstand the progressive unfolding of God's plan of salvation.

The gospel did come to the Jew first. In fact, when Jesus commissioned His disciples for the first time, in Matthew, chapter 10, verses 5 through 7, He said,

. . . Do not go in the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter any city of the Samaritans; but rather go to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, "The kingdom of heaven is at hand."

The Jewish people were the chosen people of the old dispensation and they were given the message, through the prophets, that the Messiah was coming. When the new dispensation was ushered in by the message that the Messiah had come, the Jewish nation heard it first.

The gospel went to the Jew first, but Paul's point is that the gospel can now go to both Jew and Gentile.

Paul will explain the stunning truth in Romans, chapter 10, verses 12 through 13,

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; for the same Lord is Lord of all, abounding in riches for all who call upon Him; for whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved.

No matter what your race; no matter what your heritage; no matter what your station in life might be,

. . . the gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to everyone . . .

However, while the invitation of the gospel is universal, the effective work of the gospel is limited.

The gospel's condition

5. Notice the next few words, in verse 16, that give us the gospel's condition. The gospel is personal!

Paul writes,

. . . the gospel . . . is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes . . .

"Believes," or "pisteuo" in the Greek, is literally saying, "to everyone who exercises faith". The word means, "to place your complete trust in; to entirely rely upon".

When you went to church on Sunday, you had an invitation to be there. Some decided the traffic was too much and left; others did not want to wait, so they went to Burger King Community Church. But, you went in and eventually, placed your faith in the chair in which you sat. The only thing that kept you from falling on the floor was that chair. Now, before you sat down, you believed it was a chair; you could describe the chair; you even believed it could hold you up, but it was not until you sat down in the chair, that you exercised "pisteuo," or faith. When you sat down; that is, when you completely trusted in that chair, you entirely relied upon the chair.

Salvation is an invitation to everyone. But it is granted only to those who rely upon and trust in Christ alone for salvation; to those who have sat down, as it were, in the finished work of Christ.

Paul was one who never completely recovered from his salvation. He was entirely consumed by; gripped by the gospel.

Application

When you are gripped by the gospel, at least three things happen. Let me give them to you.

The failure and sin of life in the past is re-titled "forgiveness"

1. The failure and sin of life in the past is re-titled "forgiveness".

Purely and simply, you are not faultless, but you are forgiven; you are not perfect, but you are pardoned.

The hymn writer worded it wonderfully and simply,

Just as I am, without one plea,

But that Thy blood was shed for me,

*And that Thou bidst me come to Thee,
O Lamb of God, I come, I come!*

And when you come to Him, the Lamb takes the ledger of your life and writes, in summary, beneath every deed, every action, every thought . . . the word, “forgiven”.

The mundane things of life in the present are re-directed with purpose

2. When you are gripped by the gospel, the mundane things of life in the present are re-directed with purpose.

For now, it might just be diaper pails, but when you live with forever in mind, even that receives fresh purpose as you remember an eternal soul occupies that little body. And, when that chapter is closed and another one opens, who knows what God has in store.

That is why this third thought came to my mind.

The uncertainty of life in the future is redefined with confidence

3. When you are gripped by the gospel, the uncertainty of life in the future is redefined with confidence.

When you are gripped by the gospel,

- The past is re-titled with forgiveness;
- The present is re-directed with purpose;
- The future is re-defined with confidence.

Why? Because you are gripped by the truth that if God was powerful enough to save you in the past and powerful enough to satisfy you in the present, then He must be powerful enough to guide you in the future.

And what is the future to Him? It is a place He has already been, and He has come back to lead you there.

I received a letter, a few years ago, from a man who used to attend our church. He had moved away to begin a new job as an 18-wheel truck driver. Before he moved, he had talked to me about how the Lord might use him on the road as a witness. We talked about him taking a subtle CB handle that he could use to hint that he was a Christian and maybe that would open some doors. Well, he wrote to me and said, “. . . As I was driving north on I75 toward St. Thomas, Ontario, I was prompted to write to you. My CB handle is, ‘Chaplain of the Highways’.”

I thought, “That’s subtle.”

He continued, “I send out a message, a dozen times a day, briefly explaining the gospel and inviting anyone who is interested to go to channel 24 to talk about the Lord. I get several responses every day . . . so far I’ve had the privilege of leading six men in prayer to receive Jesus as their Savior.”

That is a man who is gripped by the gospel; a messenger to his generation. It is no wonder people, like him, who are gripped by the gospel, live with forever on their mind.

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ⁱ Ralph Lauren, Romans (Kregel Publications), p. 27.

ⁱⁱ John MacArthur, broadcast transcript #1943.

ⁱⁱⁱ William Barclay, The Letters to the Corinthians (Westminster), p. 21.