

CHAPTER THREE

Good News is Good News

Today, we are bombarded with a constant stream of news. Gone are the days where we had to wait until we picked up a morning newspaper or tuned in to the News at Ten before we went to bed. The advance of internet, digital TV and mobile technology means that now we can get the news any time we want. You can read your newspaper on a tablet before you get out of bed, you can watch numerous 24-hour news channels, and your phone can give you any amount of news you want, any time you like. Today, we are bombarded with news.

Except that's not quite accurate. **The truth is, today, we are bombarded with bad news.**

If you pick up your phone right now and go to a national or international news website, then I am almost certain, in fact, I am completely certain, that the majority of stories on that site will be reporting bad news. Not all of them will be: hopefully there will be some positive news stories, and these are wonderful. But they are always in the minority. Our daily stream of news is predominantly negative. We are told about inequality: racism, poverty, discrimination and neglect. We're told about injustice: local, national and global news of people exploited and abused through the actions of others. Illness: men, women, young, old,

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all struck down by disease, injury and depression. Isolation: people separated from loved ones, people left all alone. And we are told about immorality: every day, the news feeds us examples of people saying, doing and experiencing awful things. We live in an age where we are constantly receiving bad news.

Why is that? Why is bad news so prominent? Is it because people are just negative? Actually, no. It's because the world is completely broken. Bad news dominates the news because suffering, pain and hostility are the dominant experience of humanity. History proves that, the news headlines this morning prove that, the bruises and scars on your heart prove that. And from a biblical point of view, that makes perfect sense. We have rebelled against God our Creator. We have rejected His rule over our lives. As a result, the world is cursed, humanity is hostile to God and to one another, and death has intruded as an enemy that none of us can avoid. God created the world to be so good. But we have rejected Him. And in doing so, we've consigned the newsreel of human history to be a continuous feed of predominantly bad news.

In a broken world like that, it is so refreshing, encouraging and pleasing to hear good news. Good news is wonderful to hear. When exam results are good, when a couple we know get engaged, and (with apologies to all non-Scottish readers) when Scotland win, it feels like a burst of energy runs right through us. Good news is wonderful to hear. But good news is also easy to tell. When a baby is born, when someone recovers from cancer, when Andy Murray wins Wimbledon (apologies again, non-Brits), we just can't wait to tell others. Good news is easy to tell.

The best news ever is the gospel of Jesus Christ. God has sent His Son to a broken world and a broken humanity in order to bring salvation. So that means that it will feel like the easiest news of all to tell, yes? No. That's not how it feels at all. Telling our friend the good news about our new job feels so easy. Telling our friend the good news about Jesus feels so hard. So often it feels awkward, tense,

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strained and unpleasant. I have never forgotten reading the honest recognition of this in Rebecca Manley Pippert's superb book *Out of the Saltshaker* where she astutely, and amusingly, confessed that, 'there was a part of me that secretly felt evangelism was something you shouldn't do to your dog, let alone a friend.'¹ Trying to share our faith can so often leave us feeling like the bearers of bad news.

Why is the greatest news in all of history so hard to tell? Why doesn't it feel anywhere near as easy as telling news of babies, engagements and achievements? There are lots of reasons, and there's no doubt that the devil is throwing far more opposition against the gospel than he is against the good news stories of day-to-day life. But if the gospel is the greatest news ever, how can we avoid feeling that our evangelism is an unwanted intrusion into the lives of people around us? The answer is simple. We need to remember that the good news is *good news*.

Good news. That's what the word gospel means. That's what Christianity is all about. It is the message of God's astonishing intervention into history to bring healing and hope to humanity. It is not boring, depressing, disappointing news. It is absolutely brilliant news! In a world of constant bad news, the message of Jesus is so, so good.

That good news runs through the whole Bible, but a great example of what it is all about is found in Isaiah 52:7. Isaiah was a prophet who lived just over 700 years before Jesus and he spoke powerfully to warn the people of his time about God's judgement and to give the people precious promises about God's salvation. In chapter 52, Isaiah is looking ahead to a time of healing and restoration for God's people. And in verse 7, he gives an amazing summary of what God's good news is all about:

Isaiah 52:7 How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings good news, who publishes peace, who brings

1. Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World*, revised edition (Nottingham: IVP, 1999), 11.

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good news of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, 'Your God reigns'.

Looking at this verse, we can see that Isaiah tells us four things about this good news.

Peace

The good news is a message of peace. That means that it is not a message of distress and it is not a threat. There are already more than enough of these in the world around us. That was true in Isaiah's time: the nation was disjointed, there was shocking inequality and injustice in society, and the surrounding nations loomed dangerously large over Israel.

Today, circumstances are different but the same kind of problems abound. People face the trauma of broken relationships, maybe with colleagues, maybe with friends, maybe with family. People are treated unfairly, left bruised and bitter by the behaviour of others. People have pressures breathing down their neck: to achieve at school or work, to look good on social media, to stay healthy, to conform to the expectations of the culture around us. Every day people are attacked by external circumstances giving them reason to fear and by internal anxieties producing a constant stream of worries. Life is full of distress. Life is full of threats. The gospel is not adding to these. The gospel is a message of profound, whole-of-life, peace.

Happiness

The good news is a message of happiness. 'Happy' is a word that can be both helpful and unhelpful in theology. It can easily seem unrealistic, as though we are trying to pretend that life as a Christian is always a bed of roses. It can also seem shallow, if Christianity is just about being 'happy', then there are easier ways we can achieve that.

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But neither of these is what Isaiah means. The original Hebrew that Isaiah wrote in literally says, 'who brings glad tidings of good'. 'Good news of happiness' is an excellent translation because one of the key points is that this news is not negative. This news is brilliant. It is the kind of news that makes us shout for joy. And not just joy as in 'I got an A in my exam', joy as in 'the Second World War is over'. All of this is reminding us that the gospel is not a message of misery. It is not depressing. It is not a message intended to beat people down. It is a message telling us that something utterly amazing has happened. The gospel is a message of deep, genuine happiness.

Salvation

The good news is a message of salvation. That means that it is not a message of condemnation. Jesus makes that clear in John 3. The reality of condemnation is already here, the proof of it is in the bad news we get every day. But Jesus wasn't sent to condemn the world. He was sent 'in order that the world might be saved through him' (John 3:17).

Does this mean that we shouldn't talk to people about their sin? Not at all. Talking about the gospel will, at some stage, involve discussing the reality of sin. Even that word 'salvation' tells us that there's a problem that we need to be rescued from. But when we talk about sin, we must always be mindful about what we are trying to achieve. This is where it is so important to remember that the Bible's recognition of our sin is not a criticism, it is a diagnosis. And the difference is crucial. A criticism is trying to harm you; a diagnosis is trying to heal you. The message that we proclaim is not about a God who thinks the worst of the person we are talking to. It is a message that tells our friend that, in God's eyes, they are worth saving. In God's eyes, they are worth dying for. The gospel is not about thinking the worst of people. Because when you think the worst of people, you'll find any reason you can in order to give

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up on them. But when you think the best of people, you'll find any reason you can in order never to give up on them. The whole reason that we have the gospel is because that is exactly how God thinks of us.

Whether people accept the reality of their sin is out of our hands. Question 87 of the Westminster Shorter Catechism reminds us that both a sense of sin in us and an apprehension of mercy in Jesus are only going to happen by God's grace. Our job is not to hammer people with the reality of how horrendous they are. Our job is to show people that, in a world where so many horrendous things happen, God has come to save us. The gospel is a message of astonishing, spectacular salvation.

Sovereignty

The good news is a message of God's sovereignty. As Isaiah says, 'Your God reigns.' This takes us to the heart of what the gospel is about. The good news of the gospel is that God is sovereign. He has not forgotten us; He has not abandoned us. He is King. He has come to conquer the kingdom of evil, to destroy the power of death and to rescue us from all the ways in which sin is holding us captive. He has come to put things right, and He is calling us to come back to Him. When Jesus began preaching, what did He say? He said, 'The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel' (Mark 1:15). The gospel is announcing that the King has come, and victory is His.

But this also takes us to the heart of why the gospel is such good news. God is King. That's crucial, because so much of the bad news we receive comes from bad leadership and from terrible misuse of power. So much pain and suffering comes from this; either nationally, where whole nations are a mess; domestically, where people live in tragic fear of those closest to them; or even personally, where our thoughts and decisions can lead us down paths of crippling anguish.

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God is calling us away from all of that. That's what makes the gospel such good news. He is calling us away from a world of inequality to a kingdom where every person is a precious child of God. He is calling us away from a world of injustice into a community where the most important commands are to love God and love our neighbour. He is calling us away from a world that is ill and dying and promising to bring us into a new creation where He will wipe away every tear from our eyes, where death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain (Rev. 21:4). He is calling us away from isolation into a beautiful family that stretches across all the nations of the world. He is calling us away from immorality and instead is leading us on a path of holiness, restoring us back to everything that we were originally created to be. In other words, in the gospel, God is undoing everything that makes life rubbish. And most amazingly of all, God is calling us to Himself. He is calling us into a relationship with Him through His Son. That is why Christianity is such utterly brilliant news! And the reason God can do it is because He reigns. He is King. The gospel is a message of His supreme, all-conquering sovereignty.

God's good news

So the gospel is a message of peace, of happiness, of salvation and of God's sovereignty. And it's a whole host of other wonderful things too. This is our message; this is what we want to share. It's not dull, it's not miserable, it's not depressing. We must remember that the good news is good news. But we also need to remember it's not just *our* message. In fact, it's not really our message at all. The gospel that we want to share isn't our good news. The gospel is *God's good news*.

In Romans 1:1, Paul introduces himself with these words:

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God (Rom. 1:1).

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When you see a phrase ‘something “of” something’ in the New Testament, there’s usually a decision to be made about how it is to be interpreted. There are two options; the ‘of something’ phrase is either an objective genitive or a subjective genitive. Objective means that the ‘of’ refers to something along the lines of ‘directed towards’. Subjective means that the ‘of’ refers to ‘coming from’, or ‘belonging to’. So if we take the phrase ‘love of God’, that can mean two things. It could be talking about someone’s love directed towards God. That would make God the object receiving the love (objective genitive). Or it could mean God’s love towards someone. If so, God is the subject showing the love (subjective genitive). How do we know which one is correct? The answer is context. The wider sentence or passage will normally clarify which direction the ‘of’ is going.

So when Paul talks about the gospel of God, is that an objective or subjective genitive? Does he mean ‘the gospel about God’ or does he mean ‘the gospel that comes from God’? Both of course are true, but our instinct might be to go for the first, the objective genitive, that Paul is set apart for the gospel about God. However, if we carry on a little bit further into verse 3, we discover that Paul says that he is ‘set apart for the gospel of God (v. 1) ... concerning His Son, who was descended from David (v. 3).’ That tells us that the object of the gospel is His Son; it is about Jesus. If so, then that implies that the ‘gospel of God’ in verse 1 is subjective. In other words, the good news is *God’s good news*.

Why is this obscure chat about grammar important? Well, for two reasons. One is because it means that the information that God wants to share with us is *good news*. This is so easy to take for granted. Think of God in all His majesty, power, supremacy and glory. He is miles beyond anything that we can take in. Not only that, we are minuscule in comparison. Tiny, insignificant and unworthy. But incredibly, this infinite God wants to communicate with us. That communication is only possible because of revelation.

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God reveals Himself to us. He does that in general terms through the creation around us; He does that in special detail through the Bible. When we compare ourselves to God, it is an absolute miracle that He would want to bother communicating with us at all. But what is even more amazing is that the message He wants to reveal is His message full of goodness. That's right. The God before whom you are a tiny speck ... He wants to talk to you! And He wants to tell you incredibly good news. The gospel is God's good news.

Thus, the gospel is simultaneously a line of communication and a channel through which goodness is poured out. So imagine standing on your phone underneath a tropical waterfall. That's maybe a strange combination of activities, but it's telling us exactly what God's gospel is all about. You are on the phone, so you are receiving information. And you are under a warm waterfall, so you are being showered with blessing. That's what God is wanting to do. That's why He is revealing Himself. That's what God's gospel is all about.

The second reason why it's important to see that the gospel is God's good news is because it is reminding us that you don't have to make the gospel good. It's already good! It's God's message; it's God's plan; it's God's promises. You don't need to make the news good; it already is. You just need to make sure your transmission of it is accurate. That takes us back to one final lesson from Isaiah 52:7.

Beautiful feet

As we have been saying, this verse gives us a superb summary of what good news is all about. In the New Testament, in the letter to the Romans, Paul refers to this same verse as he speaks about how important it is to share the gospel:

For 'everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.'
How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed?
And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard?
And how are they to hear without someone preaching?

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And how are they to preach unless they are sent? As it is written, 'How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!' (Rom. 10:13-15).

Here, Paul makes it clear that what Isaiah 52:7 teaches us still applies to us as we share the gospel. And the final lesson for us to learn is that when we share the good news of Jesus, we are doing something beautiful. Most of the time, we don't feel like that. It is so easy to feel repulsive. But you're not. If you are sharing the good news of Jesus, then you are doing an incredibly beautiful thing. Or as Isaiah says, you have beautiful feet.

But why feet? There are two things that come to mind. First, feet on a person walking across mountains in 730 B.C. are not going to be pretty. They will be very dirty, probably scratched, maybe even bleeding, and definitely not looking like they've just come out of a foot spa. But they are still beautiful. They are beautiful because they are carrying a wonderful message. And that tells you that your efforts to share the gospel don't need to be super-polished models of perfect eloquence and persuasion. They might in fact be a bit messy. But if you are telling people God's good news, if you are conveying it accurately, then you are doing something very beautiful. This is where it's important to remember that you are not going to ruin someone's day if you share the gospel with them. Bad news will ruin someone's day. It feels like a bus has crashed into your stomach when you receive news that's bad. The gospel isn't going to do that. That doesn't mean that everyone will be ecstatic every time we speak about Jesus. But if you share the good news of Jesus with your friend with love, joy, humility and kindness, do you really think that that will wreck their day?

Secondly, 'feet' speaks of movement, action. It is reminding us that as we share the good news, our words are always accompanied by our actions. That's why it's crucial that our presentation of the good news is never accompanied by bad conduct. Good news cannot

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be carried by bad behaviour. So we should think about our tone – should good news come with exasperation or with enthusiasm? We should think about our gestures – should good news come with a scowl or a smile? We should think about our demeanour – should good news come with harshness or gentleness? We should think about our mindset – should good news come with guilt or with joy? I am not saying that you need to put these on and pretend to be something you're not; that's just hypocrisy. What I am saying is that, if these aren't there, then you need to go back and re-assess your understanding of the gospel. Because if your theology is leaving you exasperated, scowling, harsh and guilty, then your theology is wrong. Orthodox, reformed theology and effective, beautiful evangelism are both grounded on the fact that the good news is *good news*. Tomorrow will be another day full of bad news. In the midst of all that, you have got something utterly brilliant to say.

STUDY QUESTIONS:

1. What bad news have you heard this week?
2. What types of good news do you find easy to share?
3. When you think about sharing the gospel, do you feel that you are sharing bad news or good news? In what ways?
4. What are some of the specific ways in which the gospel is good news, both as described in Isaiah 52:7 and in the rest of Scripture?
5. Think of the bad news you have heard this week. In what ways does the gospel enable us to bring good news to people in these situations?
6. Think about your tone, demeanour, gestures and mindset in sharing your faith. How should the reality of good news influence these?