

Acts 16:25-34

SI: This is a sermon series on the Gospel. We started out by asking:

What is the Gospel?

We saw that in the big picture, the Gospel is everything in the Bible, it's the whole grand story of God redeeming this fallen world.

But more specifically, the Gospel is the proclamation of salvation through Christ.

As Peter put it in his message to Cornelius:

Everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name.

Everyone who believes. What does that mean? Let's think about it.

INTRO: In 1961, a 19-year-old college student named Bruce Olsen, dropped out of the University of Minnesota. He bought a one way ticket to Venezuela.

And when he got there, he walked deep into the Amazon rain forest to find a tribe of people who he believed God was calling him to reach as a missionary.

He found the tribe, they are called the Motilone people.

In 1961 very little was known about them because they had virtually no contact with the outside world. They still used stone age tools.

For the first five years Bruce never left the rain forest.

He lived with them as one of them. He learned their language and customs.

He learned their legends.

And he pondered how to tell them the good news about Jesus Christ.

His challenge was figuring out how to communicate key ideas of the Gospel.

When Paul and Silas told the Philippian jailer, Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved they were speaking Greek and they used the Greek verb pisteuo.

Pisteuo, the noun form is pistis, can mean faith, trust, belief depending on context.

In English we have three words to work with—faith, trust, belief—that all basically mean the same thing but each has a slightly different nuance.

But the Motilone language doesn't have a word for belief, faith, or trust.

So Bruce Olsen was stumped. How could he tell them to believe in the Lord Jesus if they didn't have the word believe?

Well, as he became more fluent he heard them use an expression—they spoke of tying your hammock to something or to someone.

The Motilones lived in very large communal structures.

They would do all their cooking and daily living on the floor but they would sleep in hammocks up in the rafters. The ceilings were 20 to 30 feet high.

So it was very important to tie your hammock securely to the beams or rafters.

This was a part of their bedtime ritual, making sure hammocks tied. If you didn't, you could have a nasty fall and even break your arm. Bruce began to hear this expression, tying your hammock, used in other contexts. He realized that if you said that you tied your hammock to someone, then that meant you trusted him, you had faith in him. So that was how Bruce said it. Tie your hammock to Jesus and you will be saved. That resonated with the Motilone people and over time the vast majority of them tied their hammocks to Jesus.

Our theme for this series is the Gospel. Everywhere in the Bible the good news is something that men and women and boys and girls are summoned to believe. In Mark 1:15, the passage we studied a few weeks ago to start this series, Mark records Jesus' first words as this: The kingdom of God is near, repent and believe the Gospel. There it is. Believe, have faith, trust, tie your hammock to the good news. And this is repeated over and over in the New Testament. But as I asked a moment ago, what does it mean to believe the Gospel? What does it mean to have faith in Jesus Christ? Are those the same thing?

Let's look at this under two points:

1. Believing the Gospel means faith in an account of historical events that occurred in a certain time and place and were witnessed by many people.
2. Believing the Gospel means trusting in a person, and of course, that person is Jesus Christ.

So let's look at both and see how they connect.

MP#1 Believing the Gospel means believing in an account of historical events that occurred in a certain time and place and were witnessed by many people

Every religion and every philosophy of life requires faith.

A Buddhist has to believe that Buddha got it right about the problem of human existence and came up with the right solution to the problem.

A Muslim has to believe the Koran provides true wisdom about God and man and that it lays out the right path for all people to follow.

Even an atheist who bases his understanding of reality on the theory of evolution has to believe that evolution explains the origin of human life and everything else. Atheists say: You Christians have faith, but we have facts, you have religion but we have science. That's absurd.

They can't prove that intelligence, creativity, speech, consciousness, morality, love, beauty and all the rest came about from random genetic mutations.

That can't be proved in the laboratory or like some kind of math problem.

It has to be extrapolated from their biological theory and accepted by faith.

Everybody believes, everybody has faith, when it comes to the most important things like the meaning of life or the basis of morality or what's wrong with us, or what happens to us when we die.

So in that sense the Gospel is not unique.

It summons people to faith just like every other religion or world view.

But when you look at the content of the Gospel, you realize the faith it requires is different from the faith required by all other religions and philosophies.

They all basically expect you to believe a teaching or theory about life.

The Gospel calls you to believe that certain extraordinary things happened in history and that the people who witnessed those things and reported them were trustworthy.

Let's look at our reading in Acts 16.

Acts is filled with accounts of the earliest presentations of the Gospel.

It's important to remember when you read Acts that these are very condensed accounts of what happened and what was said.

In this story in Acts 16 that we read, Paul certainly said more to the jailor after the earthquake than, We're all still here, don't kill yourself.

It says he fell down before Paul and Silas.

They obviously said something to him at that point. They explained what had

happened and why. They took the opportunity to tell him the good news. Luke doesn't tell us what Paul and Silas said, but if you read the rest of Acts and the way Luke summarizes these sorts of conversations, it's clear they told him about Jesus Christ, who Jesus is, what he has done.

That's why the jailor asked: What must I do to be saved?

He was responding to what they had told him about salvation..

Paul wouldn't have said, Believe in the Lord Jesus if the jailor had never heard of Jesus and had no idea who he was. Paul and Silas had told him about Jesus.

Oftentimes Luke just summarizes what was said in a few words.

He says things like the apostles preached Jesus is Lord, they preached the resurrection of the dead, the way of salvation, the kingdom of God, repentance and faith.

And sometimes he just says they preached Jesus.

There are a few places where he gives a more complete outline of what was said. In Acts 10, when Peter speaks in the house of Cornelius, there is a longer outline.

Also Acts 17 when Paul spoke to the Athenian philosophers, chapter 24 and 26 when he spoke to Governor Felix and then to King Agrippa.

All of these sermons were adjusted for the audience.

What Paul says to Jews who knew the Old Testament is different from what he says to Gentiles who didn't know anything about Jewish history.

But when you combine all these summaries in Acts, the short ones and the longer ones, you see that the earliest Christian preachers told people about the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That was the good news they proclaimed: Jesus is Lord and he has risen from the dead to deliver people from the guilt and power of their sins.

Now let's park here for a moment and think about their message.

What did the earliest Christians mean when they said Jesus rose from the dead? That wasn't their way of saying that his soul was alive in heaven.

His body is dead, but his soul is alive, he's resurrected. No.

It also wasn't their way of expressing that they would always remember him, that he would always be alive in their hearts.

It also wasn't the way they described someone who they thought was dead, but it turned out he was only in a coma and resuscitated.

When they said resurrection they meant that his body really died and that it was buried in a tomb for a time and then his body came alive in such a way that

he would never die again.

Any claim that the early Christians spoke of Jesus' resurrection as a figure of speech is wrong.

From the very beginning they claimed it was a bodily resurrection that was witnessed by a great many people. Over and over they invited investigation. They invited their claims to be examined.

Paul says to Agrippa, for example, these things were not done in a corner.

There are numerous witnesses you can examine who saw Jesus perform miracles and who saw him alive.

They were telling what happened and what many of them saw.

But could it be that people back then were gullible about things like that?

That's a common bias, that people back then didn't have a skeptical filter like modern people do, so they would be inclined to believe a crazy story like this.

But that's also wrong. The pagan Greco-Romans believed death was final.

Many of them believed in some form of afterlife, but the idea of bodily resurrection was preposterous to them. They were thoroughly skeptical.

Many of the educated Jewish class had adopted this same skeptical viewpoint.

Of course the vast majority of Jews believed in the resurrection, but only thought it would happen at the end of history.

My point is that the earliest Christians knew they were preaching a message and making a historical claim that was utterly counter-intuitive for both Jews and Gentiles in the Greco-Roman world.

They admit that they themselves didn't expect it to happen.

When he died they were packing it up. Dead Messiahs don't come back to life.

His resurrection wasn't a figure of speech or a philosophical idea, it was something they witnessed with their own eyes, it bowled them over, and they began to tell about it immediately, because they knew it changes everything.

We need to remind ourselves how unique this is.

There is nothing like this in the other religions and philosophies of life.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 15 that if the resurrection didn't happen, then the

Christian faith is entirely disproved. So examine it, consider it, investigate it.

In Islam it's a sin to investigate the claims of the Koran to see if they are true.

But it's a virtue to investigate the claims of the Gospel.

Test them, seek to confirm them or disprove them if they can be disproved.

So that's what believing the Gospel means first. It means believing the biblical account of this great historical event that happened in a real time and place.

MP#2 Believing the Gospel means trusting in a person, and of course, that person is Jesus Christ.

There's a sense in which Islam requires faith in Mohammed.

A Muslim has to believe his teaching about the five pillars of salvation. And in a sense Buddhism requires faith in Buddha, that his teaching about resignation and detachment is the right path.

You could even say that atheism requires faith in Charles Darwin and his assertion that life is a gigantic accident.

In all those examples, faith is just believing in their teaching.

Those same ideas or philosophies could have been taught by someone else, and sometimes they were taught by someone else.

It's the teaching or the ideas that matter.

But it's different with the Gospel. The good news is a person.

The good news is not a system of thought or ethics, it's the living God who made heaven and earth entering the world as the man Christ Jesus and then doing awesome things to deliver us from bondage to sin and death.

Jesus was a teacher and his teaching was important.

But it's only important because of who he is and what he did.

The Apostles Creed doesn't even mention that Jesus was a teacher.

He was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, dead, and buried. And the third day he rose again from the dead.

The incarnation of the Son of God, his death on a Roman cross, his resurrection on the third day—this is the good news.

It's not a list of things you have to do or standards by which you must live—it's a proclamation of what someone else did for you.

Christians have to sound the trumpet on this point.

This is both the uniqueness of our faith and the power of our faith.

There's nothing remotely like this in any other religion or philosophy. God entered the world as a man, he lived a life of perfect goodness.

He went willingly to a painful and shameful death in our place, to pay the penalty our sins deserved.

Then, as a human being he rose to new life having conquered sin and death.

And now he offers the world his own everlasting life.

Everything else in our Christian faith is detail.

Important detail, but it's not it's not the substance. The substance is Jesus Christ.

Another way we could put it is that the Christian faith is personal in a way that no other belief system is. The Gospel calls us to trust our future to the love, power, and accomplishments of another person.

We are called to follow this person and acknowledge that he is the Lord of all creation and the King of kings.

How can a person who lived so long ago be of any relevance to us now?

Jesus lived and died and rose again 2,000 years ago in Judea.

Of course the answer is that we aren't talking about an ancient individual, we're talking about the living Jesus Christ who is as alive today as he was when he walked the roads of Galilee and the streets of Jerusalem.

We are talking about God himself who also became a man and who remains both God and man. He's as much the savior of the world today as he was when he hung on the cross and came out of the tomb.

He continues his great work of salvation that he started back then and he will complete it in due time.

I mentioned Bruce Olsen at the beginning, his work with the Motilone Indians.

There's a chapter in his autobiography that relates a breakthrough conversation he had with several members of the tribe about the Gospel.

It's long and quite complicated and you really have to read it to get the impact.

But let me try to summarize and read a few key passages.

Olsen had learned the tribe had a myth that the first man and the first woman were deceived by a false prophet so they could no find God.

Very interesting, because it was a lot like the story of the fall in Genesis 3.

So the Motilone people thought the creator God was unknowable, and as a result they were fearful of death and fearful of evil spirits.

He had also discovered another legend which I won't go into, that enabled him to communicate the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

They were intrigued by this and they asked, what does this mean for us that God became a man?

So Bruce Olsen asked them:

"How do evil, death and deception find power over the Motilone people?"

"Through the ears," Bobby answered, because language is so important to the Motilones. It is the essence of life. If evil language comes through the ears, it means death.

“Do you remember,” I said, “how after a hunt for wild boars the leader cuts the skin from the animal and puts it over his head to cover his ears and keep the evil spirits of the jungle out?” They nodded, listening closely.

Jesus Christ was murdered,” I said. “But just as you pull the skin over the chieftain's head to hide his ears, so Jesus—when He died—pulled His blood over your deception and hides it from the sight of God.” I told them Jesus was buried. A wave of grief swept over them . . . I picked up my Bible, opened it and said, “The Bible speaks that Jesus came alive after death and is alive today.”

“No one has ever come back from the dead in all Motilone history,” one man said. “I know,” I replied. “But Jesus did. It is proof that He is really God's Son.”

Nothing happened immediately from that conversation, but one of the men, this one called Bobby began to ask more questions, until the day came when he believed. “Bruchko, I've tied my hammock strings into Jesus . . . We put our hands on each other's shoulders. My mind swept back to the first time I had met Jesus and the life I had felt flow into me. Now my brother Bobby was experiencing Jesus himself, in the same way. He had begun to walk with Jesus. “Jesus Christ has risen from the dead!” Bobby shouted, so that the sound filtered far off into the jungle. “He has walked our trails! I have met Him!”

No other faith is like this faith. Not faith in a theory or philosophy—
but faith in Son of God who rose from the dead and was seen by many witnesses.
God will have to open our minds and hearts. We're stubborn in our unbelief.

But the claims are credible and the message is good news to all people—
to tribes in the Amazon forest and city dwellers in New York—
Jesus is has risen from the dead, he is Lord over all of life, and you can know
him and receive from his Spirit all the benefits and blessings of his work for you.