

The Gospel: The Return of the King

by Derrick Olliff

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(This is a revised version. The original version (October 2003) put a lot of focus on the gospel as Jesus' kingship but only said a little about the flipside of this coronation – the defeat of the previous king(s). Someone recently said something in an e-mail discussion list that helped me get a full picture of this aspect of the gospel, so I've revised this paper by adding material that describes this aspect. Thus, a good summary phrase that I would now use for the gospel is "dynastic transfer." The gospel is indeed "Jesus is Lord," but the other side of this coin is that He became Lord by defeating the old tyrant rulers and plundering their goods.)

It is quite common for the gospel to be seen as what we may call the "evangelical conditional." That is, the gospel is thought of as the offer of personal salvation. The gospel says you will be saved from your sins if you repent and believe in Jesus and His atonement as the only way to salvation. The gospel then is the answer to the question, "What must I do to be saved?" Those who are more oriented toward Reformation theology such as Lutherans and Calvinists tend to be more specific. They tend to focus on the gospel as a description of the basis upon which individuals can be saved – by God's grace alone through faith alone. On this view, the gospel is the doctrine that individuals receive a judicial standing of "not guilty" from God based solely on faith in Jesus. With this definition, the gospel is not so much about the possibility of salvation as it is about the specific way by which God pardons sins.

These ideas are true enough. The NT does discuss the offer of salvation and what that salvation looks like. It does teach that justification is a gratuitous gift that men cannot merit. But neither the offer of salvation to individuals nor the specific basis of salvation for individuals is the gospel. To begin with, the gospel was something that would be new; it was promised in the OT, but that promise was not fulfilled until Jesus' first advent. Both salvation in general and justification by faith in particular were already operative in the OT. Men had their sins forgiven and were saved by God's free grace in the OT, and when Paul mentioned justification, he often went to the OT to make his point. "The just shall live by faith" (Hab. 2:4). These ideas, then, cannot define the gospel. Many would probably include a reference to the resurrection in their definition of gospel. This gets us closer to the mark because we have now included a reference to something that was historically new. But even here, we have only scratched the surface of the biblical picture of the gospel.

Notice as well that if the gospel is a timeless description of the salvation of individuals, we are going to have a hard time finding a significant focus on the gospel in the Gospels. Indeed, when Protestants want to describe what they believe is the gospel, they almost always go to the epistles of Romans and Galatians. But what about the "Gospels"? One would think that with such a title, the gospel would be all over the place in the Gospels. Yet within the Gospels, we do not find much in the way of a timeless offer of salvation and even less regarding the doctrines of sola fide and sola gratia. Jesus simply did not go around preaching these doctrines. Moreover, the parables do not really have much to do with an offer of salvation to individuals or with the "Reformation solas." Again, this is not to deny these doctrines. They are certainly true. This is just to point out that the gospel is something else.

What then is the gospel? The NT itself tells us that the gospel, which it also calls "the mystery of God," was promised through the prophets in the OT (Rom. 1:1, 2; Rev. 10:7). Thus, we should not start with Romans, Galatians, or some other portion of the NT. We should start where the Bible starts – with the promise of the gospel as it was originally given under the old covenants.

In its most basic form, the term 'gospel' (Greek nouns euaggelion and euaggelia, verbs euaggelizo and euaggelizomai) means "good news." But even before we get to the specific gospel that was proclaimed throughout the NT, we find that the "generic" use of the term is almost always related to a certain kind of news. This news is either the defeat/death of a king, the ascension of a new king, or both. And the news is good because the old king was usually a tyrant, enemy, or the like.

So for example, Saul's death was "proclaimed" (euaggelizo, euaggelizomai) among Philistia as the good news of a vanquished king (I Sam. 31:8, 9; II Sam. 1:20). From the standpoint of the Philistines, this was gospel. But someone tried to proclaim this "good news" to David and he did not take it very well (II Sam. 4:9, 10). David mourned another gospel proclamation as well. His son Absalom had treasonously grabbed the throne of Israel and forced David into exile. But David's men later defeated Israel's army and Absalom was killed. This meant that David could return as king to Israel; thus, this "good news" was brought to him (II Sam. 18:19-32 where some form of 'gospel' occurs nine times). David was distraught because his son had died (II Sam. 18:33), but

this does not take away from the fact that the message was indeed gospel. The usurper had been killed and the true king would reign.

Years later, Adonijah thought that Jonathan was bringing “good news” regarding Adonijah’s attempt to be David’s successor (I Kin. 1:41-43). It was indeed good news of a new coronation, but the new king was Solomon. Progressing through the kingdom years, we find that the Lord scared off some invading Syrians so that Israelites were able to plunder their empty camps. This deliverance from the Syrians – their defeat and plunder – was described as a day of “good news” (II Kin. 7:9). The prophet Nahum described the judgment and destruction of the Assyrians as “good news” that would come from a messenger and result in feasting for Judah (Nah. 1:15; 2:1 in LXX). Finally, we can see that when God gains victory over His enemies, many “proclaim” (euangelizo) the defeat and plunder of kings (Ps. 68:11, 12; 69:12, 13 in LXX).

So the bottom line with respect to these “generic” references is that the gospel relates news of a tyrant’s defeat and/or the ascension of a new king. But the NT clearly refers to a promised “gospel” that we have not yet addressed. Is this specific gospel – the “big gospel” – like the more generic ones that we have reviewed thus far? In fact it is, because what it promised was just like these smaller gospels. The ultimate OT gospel was the announcement that God the King would return to gather His people from exile and rule among them.

“Comfort, yes, comfort My people!”
says your God.
“Speak comfort to Jerusalem, and cry out to her,
that her warfare is ended,
that her iniquity is pardoned;
for she has received from the Lord’s hand
double for all her sins.”

The voice of one crying in the wilderness:
“Prepare the way of the Lord;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be exalted
and every mountain and hill brought low;
the crooked places shall be made straight
and the rough places smooth;
the glory of the Lord shall be revealed,
and all flesh shall see it together;
for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

The voice said, “Cry out!”
And he said, “What shall I cry?”...

O Zion,
you who bring good tidings [euangelizo],
get up into the high mountain;
O Jerusalem,
you who bring good tidings [euangelizo],
lift up your voice with strength,
lift it up, be not afraid;
say to the cities of Judah, “Behold your God!”

Behold, the Lord God shall come with a strong hand,
and His arm shall rule for Him;
behold, His reward is with Him,
and His work before Him.
He will feed His flock like a shepherd;
He will gather the lambs with His arm,
and carry them in His bosom,
and gently lead those who are with young. (Is. 40:1-6, 9-11)

Awake, awake!
Put on your strength, O Zion;
put on your beautiful garments,
O Jerusalem, the holy city!
For the uncircumcised and the unclean
shall no longer come to you.

Shake yourself from the dust, arise;
sit down, O Jerusalem!
Loose yourself from the bonds of your neck,
O captive daughter of Zion!...

For thus says the Lord God:

“My People went down at first
into Egypt to dwell there;
then the Assyrian oppressed them without cause.
Now therefore, what have I here,” says the Lord,
“That My people are taken away for nothing?
Those who rule over them
make them wail,” says the Lord,
“and My name is blasphemed continually every day.
Therefore My people shall know My name;
therefore they shall know in that day
that I am He who speaks:
‘Behold, it is I.’”

How beautiful upon the mountains
are the feet of him who brings good news [euangelizo],
who proclaims peace,
who brings glad tidings [euangelizo] of good things,
who proclaims salvation,
who says to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”
Your watchmen shall lift up their voices,
with their voices they shall sing together;
for they shall see eye to eye
when the Lord brings back Zion.
Break forth into joy, sing together,
you waste places of Jerusalem!
For the Lord has comforted His people,
He has redeemed Jerusalem.
The Lord has made bare His holy arm
in the eyes of all the nations;
and all the ends of the earth shall see
the salvation of our God.” (Is. 52:1, 2, 4-10)

So the gospel was the promise that the glory of the Lord would be revealed in that He would come with power to gather and shepherd His flock. We can sum this up by describing the gospel with the proclamation that “Our God reigns!” (Is. 52:7). It refers to the time when God would return to His people in order to redeem them from exile and reign as King. But this new exodus would include more than just the Jews, for “all the ends of the earth” would see “the salvation of God.” Isaiah made this point several times. The Servant by whom all of this was to take place would also be a light and a covenant to the nations (Is. 42:5-7; 49:5, 6). The foreigner and even the eunuch (who was excluded from the commonwealth of Israel, Deut. 23:1) would be joined to the Lord and would receive an everlasting name (Is. 56:3-6), because “My house shall be called a house of prayer for all nations” (Is. 56:7). The Redeemer would come to Zion (Is. 59:15-21) and draw the gentiles to the city of God.

Arise, shine;
for your light has come!
And the glory of the Lord is risen upon you.
For behold, the darkness shall cover the earth,
and deep darkness the people;
but the Lord will arise over you,
and His glory will be seen upon you.
The gentiles shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your rising.

“Lift up your eyes all around, and see:
they all gather together, they come to you;
your sons shall come from afar,
and your daughters shall be nursed at your side.
Then you shall see and become radiant,

and your heart shall swell with joy;
because the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you,
the wealth of the gentiles shall come to you.
The multitude of camels shall cover your land,
the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah;
all those from Sheba shall come;
they shall bring gold and incense,
and they shall proclaim the praises [euaggelizo] of the Lord.
All the flocks of Kedar shall be gathered together to you,
the rams of Nebaioth shall minister to you;
they shall ascend with acceptance on My altar,
and I will glorify the house of My glory.” (Is. 60:1-7)

If this was to be Israel’s salvation and if it was to be a return from exile and a release from captivity (Is. 61:1), then there must have been an enemy that would have to be defeated first. And so this proclamation of God’s kingly return to His people included descriptions of judgment on the old tyrant kings. The nations were lightweights compared to Yahweh and He would “take them away like stubble” (Is. 40:15-24). This meant Babylon in particular. Just before describing the gospel, Isaiah recorded that the Southern Kingdom would be defeated and plundered by Babylon (Is. 39:5-7). So it is only fitting that the gospel proclamation would announce judgment on this particular enemy (Is. 47). The new King would kill the old one and take his kingdom. He would restore His people and reign over them by trampling their oppressors in the winepress of His wrath (Is. 63:1-6). Thus, the promised gospel would be liberty for the one (Is. 61:1) and vengeance for the other (Is 61:2).

But as big an enemy as Babylon was, Isaiah’s gospel gives glimpses of a bigger foe. Thus, most of chapters 40-65 seem to be devoted to describing how God would deal with Israel’s sins. Ultimately, there would be no one who could deal with the situation so He would deal with it Himself (Is.59:15-20). He would send His true Servant Israel to bear His people’s sins (Is. 52:13 – 53:12). The oppressing nations certainly needed to be overthrown, but the real tyrant appears to be sin itself (and therefore death, the “wages of sin”). But with the Lord’s salvific return, He would “swallow up death forever” (Is. 25:8). Fundamentally then, the gospel would proclaim the twin pillars of dynastic transfer: the Messiah would overthrow the old evil rulers and reign as the true King.

Early on in “the Gospels,” we are told that John the Forerunner came as a “voice of one crying in the wilderness” who would “prepare the way of the Lord” (Matt. 3:1-3; Mark 1:1-4). This historical event was the very “preface” to the fulfillment of the gospel according to the Isaiah 40 passage quoted above. So what did he say and do? We are told that John “announced the good news” (i.e., “gospel,” Luke 3:18). Matthew and Luke gave some details regarding this good news.

He [John] will also go before Him [the Lord] in the spirit and power of 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)

In those days John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judaea, and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!” (Matt. 3:1, 2)

And he [John] went into all the region around the Jordan, preaching a baptism of repentance for the remission of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of Isaiah the prophet, saying: [quote of Isaiah 40:3-5]. Then he said to the multitudes that came out to be baptized by him, “Brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Therefore bear fruits worthy of repentance, and do not begin to say to yourselves, “We have Abraham as our father.” For I say to you that God is able of to raise up children to Abraham from these stones. And even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees. Therefore every tree which does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.... Now as the people were in expectation, and all reasoned in their hearts about John, whether he was the Christ or not, John answered, saying to all, “I indeed baptize you with water; but One mightier than I is coming, whose sandal strap I am not worth to loose. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fan is in His hand, and He will thoroughly clean out His threshing floor, and gather the wheat into His barn; but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” Luke 3:3-9, 15-17)

John was therefore the forerunner who would prepare for the arrival of the Lord. He preached the gospel because he preached the imminent coming of the kingdom and of the Messiah-Lord who would bring salvation to the penitent faithful and judgment on the rebellious. He was to prepare the people for “the visitation” (cf. Luke 19:44) – the arrival of the promised King.

Matthew referred to the gospel as the “gospel of the kingdom” (Matt. 4:23; 9:35; 24:14). Luke referred to it as the “gospel of the kingdom of God” (Luke 4:43; 8:1; 16:16; Acts 8:12). We are told that the twelve disciples were

commissioned to preach the “kingdom of God” (Luke 9:2), and this meant that they preached the “gospel” (Luke 9:6). Jesus Himself preached the “gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe the gospel.’” (Mark 1:14, 15) And throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus told wayward Israel to repent because He (the King) and the kingdom had arrived. God had come back to His people: the faithful would be gathered together while the unfaithful would be condemned. Most of the parables describe this series of events. This is the central theme of the Gospels – it is the gospel.

After Christ’s death, resurrection, and ascension whereby He was crowned as King (I Cor. 15:20-28; Heb. 1:3-13) and received all power in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18), the apostles preached the same gospel message. They “preached the gospel of peace” (euaggelizomenos eirenen) which is described with the parenthetical comment that Jesus is “Lord of all” (Acts 10:36). Details of the way Jesus attained this lordship include His anointing with power, His miracles, death, and resurrection along with the truths that He is the judge of all and the means of salvation (Acts 10:37-43). More generally, a sweep through the book of Acts will show that the basic focus of the evangelists (from which other important truths flow) was to proclaim that “there is another king – Jesus” (Acts 17:6, 7). For examples, see the emphasis on Jesus as the promised Davidic King and Lord in Acts 2:22-36 and 13:16-41.

In his letters, Paul provided a description of the gospel along with the implications of it. Paul told the Corinthians that the gospel – the message preached by the evangelists – was “Christ Jesus as Lord” (II Cor. 4:3-5). He brought out some historical particulars of this when he told Timothy that Jesus is “of the seed of David [and] was raised from the dead according to my gospel...” (II Tim. 2:8). He gave even more detail to the Romans.

Paul, a bondservant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated to the gospel of God which he promised before through His prophets in the Holy Scriptures, concerning his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh, and declared to be the Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead. Through Him, we have received grace and apostleship for obedience to the faith among all nations for His name... (Rom. 1:1-5).

Thus, the promised “gospel of God” had come to pass. Jesus is the promised Davidic Lord and King who has come to His people, won a great victory over the enemy (sin and death), and is gathering the nations into the covenant.

Paul hit on these themes in various places. For example, some of the historical particulars regarding the return of the King and His salvation include the facts regarding Christ’s sufferings, atoning death, and resurrection (I Cor. 15:1-8; I Pet. 1:10-25). A significant reason for the King’s return was to incorporate the nations into covenant relationship with God, and Paul discussed this with regularity. So Paul’s “gospel” is “according to the revelation of the mystery kept secret since the world began but now made manifest” (Rom. 16:25, 26). It is called “the mystery of the gospel” (Eph. 6:19). It is “this mystery among the gentiles: which is Christ in you” (Col. 1:27). Thus, a central part of the gospel is that Jesus has brought salvation to the gentiles by incorporating them into the covenant – into Himself (Col. 1:21-27; Eph. 3:1-6). It is called a mystery because it was only known in vague terms in the OT. But as we have seen, it was foretold in the OT (Rom. 1:1, 2; Rev. 10:7). In fact, “the Scripture... preached the gospel to Abraham beforehand, saying, ‘In you all the nations shall be blessed.’” (Gal. 3:8) In Christ, the two men of the old order have become the one man of the new order (Eph. 2:11-22).

But if a new order had dawned, this meant that the old order with its corruptions must be judged. The gospel therefore includes God’s judgment (Rom. 2:16). It must be obeyed, and those who do not will be “punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord” (II Thess. 1:6-9). Jesus is the new King and all men have a duty to acknowledge this fact and behave accordingly (Phil. 2:9-11). So during the “transition period” between the old order and the new order (30-70AD), the gospel warnings were preached along with the gospel promises to Israel first (e.g., Luke 3:3-18) and then to the gentiles (e.g., Acts 17:30, 31). There will of course be a final judgment for all of humanity at the consummation of history, but there was also a judgment of the old order in the 1st century (I Pet. 4:17). For those who rejected the new age with Jesus as the King of kings, the gospel itself proclaimed that they would fall along with the old tyrants.

Then I saw another angel flying in the midst of heaven, having the everlasting gospel to preach to those who dwell on the earth – to every nation, tribe, tongue, and people – saying with a loud voice, “Fear God and give glory to Him, for the hour of His judgment has come; and worship Him who made heaven and earth, the sea and springs of water.” And another angel followed, saying, “Babylon is fallen, is fallen, that great city, because she has made all nations drink of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.” Then a third angel followed them, saying with a loud voice, “If anyone worships the beast and his image, and receives his mark on his forehead or on his hand, he himself shall also drink of the wine of the wrath of God, which is poured out full strength into the cup of His indignation.” (Rev. 14:6-10)

The “everlasting gospel to preach” (both a noun and verb are used, “euaggelion aionion euaggelisasi”) is the proclamation that judgment has come to Babylon and to the beast. The old order must die, and that means that the tyrants of the old order and their lackeys must also die. The ultimate tyrants to be defeated are of course sin and death (cf. Rom. 6; I Cor. 15:12-26, 42-57), but at less ultimate levels we can list Satan (who was thrown out of heaven and bound at the first advent, Matt. 12:27-29; Luke 10:17-19; Rev. 12:7-10) and his demons (who were thrown out of people left and right during the first advent) as well as unfaithful Jews and oppressive gentiles who would not obey the gospel. The good news is that the real King has judged these usurpers and oppressors in order to take up His crown and take back His territory. All heaven and earth are now His (Matt. 28: 18).

Finally, with respect to the history that makes up the gospel proper, there is a very ironic aspect to this whole story that we should note. We have seen that the “good news” most always involves the overthrow and death of a king. The king lost his crown because he was killed. Thus, when the crown passed from Saul to David and from Absalom to David, the old king lost his crown because he died. In Isaiah, the tyrant nations were dethroned and “killed.” But Jesus died (and was resurrected obviously), not because He lost, but in order to gain the victory. He used the very thing that proved that a king had lost his crown as the path by which He gained His crown. But this is also ironic from another angle, for God was doing to death what He had previously done to the Egyptian gods: using its own territory/dominion to judge and defeat it. Jesus defeated death by dying. And thus, death was swallowed up by death. The gospel is history’s ultimate irony.

Now that we have seen what the gospel is, we can quickly review what the gospel does. It has many implications, applications, and effects. To give just the briefest of overviews, we can see that people are called through the gospel unto salvation and glory (II Thess. 2:13, 14) This is because the gospel is the “power of God to salvation” (Rom. 1:16). Some have tried to get a definition of ‘gospel’ from Romans 1:16-17, but notice that this passage does not tell us what the gospel is. Paul already did that in the very first sentence of the letter to the Romans. Rather, this passage tells us what the gospel does. The gospel effects salvation because “in it the righteousness of God is revealed” (Rom. 1:17). God promised the gospel in the OT and His righteousness is revealed through Jesus’ first advent – the fulfillment of that promise. And the fact that Jesus did return as King to defeat the enemies and gather His people together means that those who trust in Him and His victory will be saved. Thus, the gospel is not a statement about an individual’s salvation. Rather, the gospel leads to such a salvation. Thus, it is the “gospel of your salvation” (Eph. 1:13) and it brings new life (I Cor. 4:15).

We should therefore see that the gospel is not, “You will be saved if you repent and believe in Jesus.” This conditional is a consequence of the gospel, but it would be significantly reductionistic to say that this equals the gospel. The gospel is far more objective and broader in scope than this. First, it is more objective because the gospel is not a conditional. It is first and foremost an historical fact. God made certain promises in the OT regarding His return to His people, His kingly reign, and the incorporation of the gentiles into the covenant, and the gospel is the proclamation that those promises have been fulfilled – Jesus is Lord (i.e., “Our God reigns,” Is. 52:7).

Second, the gospel is broader in scope because it is not just about the possibility of salvation coming to individuals. It is first of all about the arrival of God’s kingdom, Christ’s coronation as King of heaven and earth, and His victory over the ultimate enemy – sin and death. It is because of this universal, all encompassing, victorious kingship that we can then talk about some specifics such as the salvation of individuals. But we cannot reduce the kingdom to those specifics. Moreover, even when talking about salvation, we should see that the gospel is first of all about salvation in a “communal” sense. For example, the fact of a specific gentile’s salvation is an application of the broad gospel truth that God has brought salvation to the gentiles and incorporated them as fellow heirs into the same body (Eph. 2:11-22). But if we were to say that the gospel is “you [an individual] can be saved,” we would have truncated a general and historical fact down to a specific, individualized conditional.

We should also see that the gospel is not a doctrine about the nature or basis of salvation (e.g., the doctrine of justification by faith alone). Neither does it describe an *ordo salutis* – a logical order of how an individual is saved from his sins. As with the “evangelical conditional,” these doctrines are implications or applications of the gospel. But once again, the gospel is far more objective and broader in scope than these doctrines. As we saw above, the gospel is broader in scope than the doctrine of salvation, yet the doctrine of justification is a still more specific part or aspect of salvation (there are obviously other aspects of salvation). Moreover, the gospel is first of all about history and eschatology – the fulfillment of a nexus of promises. Specific and detailed questions related to aspects or consequences of this fulfillment (e.g., the way in which an individual may stand justified before God) are just that – specific consequences or applications of an historical reality.

Thus, the most direct and compact definition of the gospel is that it is the proclamation that “Jesus is Lord.” A fuller definition of ‘gospel’ would look like this: the promised new age and kingdom of God has arrived, because Jesus is the Messiah-God who has come to reign as King over all by conquering the old ruling tyrants (the worst being sin, death, and the Devil) via resurrection, redeeming His covenanted people, and bringing the fullness of

the covenant to the nations. The heart of the gospel proclamation is this dynastic transfer. We can go on to discuss certain consequences of this truth such as the salvation of specific individuals and we can also discuss specific aspects of that salvation (e.g., regeneration, justification). But it would be significantly reductionistic to limit the gospel to these specific applications or consequences.