

The 19<sup>th</sup> century evangelist D. L. Moody was famous for saying, *“I look up this world as a wrecked vessel. God has given me a lifeboat and said, ‘Moody, save all you can.’”* It sounds very nice and pious. But I don’t think what Moody says--and what many people have learned along similar lines--is in line with either the teaching of Jesus or the apostle Paul. It’s an idea of what I call the “shrunk gospel” much of the church knows. Here’s the shrunk gospel in a nutshell: *Earth is just our temporary home; God is displeased and angry with us; Jesus only came to earth because we sinned; Forgiveness of sins is the point of it all; Salvation is a matter between the individual and God; Our primary identity is a redeemed sinner; The church is helpful but not necessary to Christian growth; Christian living is at its core just the avoidance of sin; God is going to burn this earth up at the judgment; We’re going to spend eternity in heaven with God.”*

Here’s the problem. That doesn’t really fit into the Gospel plan of God as the NT teaches, and certainly not Paul here in 2 Corinthians. In these verses we’ve been looking at, you hear these words and phrases such as *“The old passed away, the new has come,”* *“There is new creation,”* *“God reconciling the world to himself,”* *“that we might become God’s righteousness.”* In these few verses, we have God’s great plan unfolded, and it just doesn’t fit Moody’s or the “shrunk gospel” I just gave. It’s not the Gospel by either Jesus’ teaching or Paul. In fact, these very verses we’ve just read demonstrate this. When we look at what Paul says here, there is a framework that Paul is working from that sets all his teaching in a specific and vital context. In 2 Timothy 2:8, Paul can say, *“Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my*

*gospel.*” Hear that again. Does Paul leave anything out? It’s short, but does that sound like “the shrunken gospel”? Where does the “shrunken gospel” include the significance of “Jesus, raised from the dead”? The “shrunken gospel” emphasizes we’re all “condemned sinners” but Paul here says “*in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them!*” The typical “shrunken gospel” speaks of our need of Christ’s righteousness, yet Paul says here we “*become God’s righteousness.*” And where in the “shrunken gospel” is there anything that sounds like “New Creation”? The problem with “shrunken gospel” is that it works in a framework imposed upon the Bible. It’s the framework of what may be called the gospel of personal salvation.

But if we just consider Jesus’ own teaching in the Sermon on the Mount--which we have--and Paul’s teaching--just in 2 Corinthians--we will see that is not how either of them teach. And it’s because the framework of the New Testament--the whole Bible actually--is different from the imposed framework of the gospel of personal salvation. The framework of Jesus and Paul is the whole Story of the Bible. For them, the Gospel--the Good News--is framed as the Story of Israel come to fulfillment in Jesus the Christ, King and Lord who saves the whole world, and brings heaven and earth together (Eph 1:10). The gospel of personal salvation is a saving message, but hardly ever gets to the Story of Israel, really only tells us that Jesus is Savior, and says little of the resurrection of Jesus and New Creation. Jesus’ Lordship for the present is essentially only to keep us on the “straight and narrow” path of individual personal righteousness, which is what most people think is the essence of the Christian life. Let me say this for clarification: The gospel of personal salvation is true, but it’s not nearly true enough.

The gospel of personal salvation is part of the Gospel message, but it's not the Gospel itself or as big. The Gospel is not advice about how to be saved. The gospel of personal salvation is an artificial frame-work imposed upon the Biblical framework of God's Great Story of Salvation. For the Gospel is the Good News--a good and great declaration that Jesus Christ is Lord over all and for everyone. There is a New World--a saving new reality upon us.

If we want to really grasp the meaning of Paul's teaching, then we have to back up a bit. First, we have spent considerable time earlier in the year looking at Jesus' teaching in the Sermon on the Mount. And what all that was about--when you take up all that Jesus says there--is this: God's transforming, saving future kingdom--for the world--was arrived in the present--in the person and work of Jesus. Further, those who follow him can practice, here and now, the ways and habits of life which will find their ultimate goal in that coming future kingdom--the future prayed for in those words, "*thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.*" Jesus declaratory Beatitudes about blessed-ness are realities to be experienced and known and practiced in the here and now, and known more fully in the future. The Beatitudes announce a New state of affairs, a new reality, the breaking in of a wonderful life-giving New Creation--to use Paul's terminology--on earth, if only in part, but real nonetheless. Look at Psalm 72 that we read and read "Jesus" in the place of the King that is celebrated here. Then think about Jesus' own life and ministry. What Psalm 72 celebrates Jesus fulfilled, is fulfilling now as Lord, and will fulfill completely still yet.

The point of what Jesus said and did in his life and teaching was not to get us to heaven, but He announced heaven's blessing and power as coming to earth in him.

Jesus' good news was "*the kingdom of God is at hand,*" which he said over and over. And as he was teaching, he was saying that by and with him we may practice those kingdom realities and truths here and now. Where do you hear anything in Jesus' Good News of "condemned sinners" or "believe in me, and you will go to heaven"? Where is there in his Good News of the kingdom anything that sounds like "wrecked vessel" we need to get off of and set sail to heaven for eternity? We have to ask, "what then is the good news" and "salvation"?

Out of Jesus' own lips--and Paul's own teaching here as well--salvation began on earth with Jesus in our midst. Salvation is God's blessing, fellowship, and presence and his life in us here and now--as well as forever. His salvation is that power and presence to transform our lives ever more conformed to his Son Jesus. And as we are transformed by the Jesus-Spirit, we do his will "on earth, as it is in heaven." No, not perfectly, but truly just the same, as we will be about his kingdom business, not merely sin-avoidance. Jesus was saying, "*Now that I am here, God's world is coming to new birth; and once you realize that, you'll see that the habits and ways I teach you anticipate that new world here and now.*" That's why Paul could say, as we saw last time, "*If anyone is in Christ, there is new creation; see, everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new,*" (2 Cor 5:17).

Now, Jesus said, this is not easy. You must "*deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me,*" (Mt 16:24), but because the reality of God's kingdom and Spirit, it can be done. As God's Son--God's perfect child--he came to show us how to be God's sons and daughters. As God's perfect image, he came to teach us what is to "image God" as we were made in the very beginning (Gen 1:26-27). By his cross and resurrection, he

began the age of New Creation and released the power of his Spirit to include us in it. We can learn the new way, the right way of being human again, and start practicing it now. See, the Gospel is not advice on how to “get saved”. It’s the Good News that Jesus has unleashed the new life of the New Creation, the life of the New Covenant (2 Cor 3:6), the life of heaven on earth until heaven descends to earth. Now, yes, a major implication is: therefore, “*repent--change you present way of thinking--and get with the gospel program.*”

Psalm 72 which we read speaks to the hopes of the Biblical framework of God’s blessed reign and rule on earth that Jesus actually began. This is part of what Paul understands about Jesus when he says earlier in this letter, “*All the promises of God have their YES in Christ,*” (2 Cor 1:20). But if we don’t know those promises--if we don’t know the Biblical framework of Salvation--which goes all the way back to Abraham--to whom God said, “*All the families of the earth will be blessed in/through you,*” (Gen 12:3), if we don’t know why God called Israel to be the people of God and the “light to the world,” and how failing that calling God planned for a New Covenant and a New Creation and way of being the people of God--then we can’t really get why Jesus’ announcement of the Kingdom was the Gospel. Have you ever thought about that? That when Jesus announces the Gospel, he says nothing about his death? He doesn’t make any reference to the good news of how to “get to heaven”! For the Gospel of Jesus--and Paul--is framed within the many-Jewish-generations-hoped-for “kingdom of God” on earth--just like we read in Psalm 72. Again, maybe you can hear it now. The Gospel Hope is not us going to heaven, but heaven’s rule coming to earth. In Jesus, it did exactly that!

That's why Isaac Watts could take Psalm 72--at least parts of it-- and turn it into the hymn we just sang. He got it! "*Jesus shall reign where'er the sun does his successive journeys run...to him shall endless prayer be made, and praises throng to crowd his head ...People and realms of every tongue dwell on his love with sweetest song...Blessings abound where're he reigns...the weary find eternal rest, and all who suffer want are blessed.*" And you hear those same echoes in our closing hymn, "*Joy to the World!*" which is Watts's hymn treatment of Psalm 98. It's not just about birth of "baby Jesus," contrary to the Will Ferrell character Ricky Bobby. It's about the coming of the Savior and Lord for the sake of the whole creation! "*No more let sins and sorrows grow, or thorns infest the ground; He comes to make his blessings flow, far as the curse is found, far as the curse is found! He rules the world with truth and grace, and makes the nations prove the glories of his righteousness, and wonders of his love.*"

To think this way, requires we actually think about it. But part of the problem that keeps us from thinking about them rightly is the shrunken-gospel framework that we have inherited and been taught--and sung--that blinds or at least makes it hard to actually hear the message of the Gospel as Jesus, Paul, and the rest of the New Testament teach in fulfillment of the Great Story of the Bible. Jesus never taught "the sinner's prayer" as we may think of it. He did teach a prayer of his own making. We know it as the Lord's Prayer, in which the kingdom--and by implication Jesus also--is its center. Jesus' call to follow him then--as well as now--is to take up the task of learning from him. That's what a disciple is--a learner, one who follows the Master. For it is from him one learns the ways and habits of real human living now and that point forward to the coming-kingdom life--"*life of the age to come,*" as Jesus put it.

Jesus' call, then, only makes sense when it is couched in the terms made famous by German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "*When Jesus calls a person, he bids him come and die.*" Jesus didn't say, "*God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.*" Nor did he say, "*I accept you as you are, so now you can do whatever you want.*" He said, "*If you want to become my followers, deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me,*" (Mk 8:34). He spoke of losing one's life in order to gain it, instead of clinging to it and so lose it. He spoke of his death, followed by resurrection and exaltation to Lordship, and called his own to follow likewise.

Exactly in line with the Beatitudes, he described and invited us to enter into an upside-down world, an inside-out world, a world where all the things people--even religious people--normally assume about human happiness and importance, are set aside and a new order, a new way of living, is established. But as people began to get into it--to follow him--they began to see that he was doing was putting the world right -side up and outside in. His way--as odd as it seemed--was in fact the "abundant life," (Jn 10:10), the life of God, from God, and to God. This, then, is why Paul says, "*All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ.*" And from God--in the discipleship of Jesus--lo and behold, we have been given the kingdom work to live and proclaim the message that "*in Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation.*" There is the Good News, friends! As Paul puts in earlier in this letter, "*We do not proclaim our-selves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, and ourselves as your servants for his sake,*" (2 Cor 4:5). There is more here to consider, but that's for next time. But in the mean-time, read again over Psalm 72 here and place Jesus as the

King. Then read the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, and hear again what Jesus proclaims.

So, I want it clear. I am challenging your thinking--and my own. I want you to think differently than you're accustomed when you hear the words, "*Good News.*" And look to Jesus and Paul afresh to see what they mean. NT scholar N.T. Wright summarizes it this way:

*"Jesus didn't come...to reinforce any of the normal ways in which Western Christians--and non-Western, too--have thought about 'behavior.' He came to inaugurate God's kingdom, in his life, and public ministry, and through the climax of both his death and resurrection. He came to rescue Israel, he came to rescue humankind, and thereby to rescue creation. And, with that, everything is different. Jesus came, in fact, to launch God's new creation, and with it a new way of being human...and with that, he launched also a project for rehumanizing human beings, a project in which they would find their hearts cleansed and softened, find themselves turned upside down and inside out, and discover a new language to learn and every incentive to learn it. God's kingdom was bursting into the present world... [and] human beings were called at last to rediscover what they had been made for, what Israel had been created for. They were, after all, to be rulers and priests, following Jesus' ultimate royal and priestly achievement, and they would have to learn from scratch what it meant. They were to practice virtue--virtue of a kind never before imagined," (N. T. Wright, *After You Believe*, p. 135).*

In the movie *Chariots of Fire*, winning was everything for runner Harold Abrams. He had always won, but then he ran against Scotsman Eric Liddell. The pain of loss is so overwhelming he considered never running again. His girlfriend, Cybil, seeing him in such a way, says, "*Harold, this is ridiculous. It's a race you lost, not a relative. No-body's dead.*" Harold moans, "*I've lost.*" She says, "*I know. I was there. I remember watching you. It was marvelous. You were marvelous. He was more marvelous...He won fair and square.*" "*Well, that's that,*" Abrams says. She says, "*If you can't take a beating, perhaps it's for the best.*" He says, "*I don't run to take beatings--I run to win! If I can't win, I won't run.*" Cybil pauses, and then says firmly, "*If you don't run, you can't win.*"



My point: Races are meant to be attempted and run. Christianity is meant to be grasped and lived. And you can't live it well and as intended, if you don't have the real Gospel framework right. That's what these verses of Paul are all about. May God enable us to get it right. Amen.

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