

## GOOD NEWS HAS EXPLOSIVE POWER

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The reason why salvation is the result of believing good news rather than doing good works is that there is no power in a program of good works to change the human heart. After you get through doing everything good you can think of, you find that your original selfishness is still there. It may be disguised so that you hardly recognize it, but history is replete with examples of “religious” people wearing themselves out with good works who do it all for self-centered reasons without genuine love. “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing.” 1 Corinthians 13:3 NIV.

Phony good news tells us that such selfishness is OK. It tells us that a genuine change of heart is impossible, so there is no use even hoping for it. Just adjust your thinking to be satisfied with being selfish and sinful. Other people are that way; why not you? Such counterfeit good news declares that God Himself will be content for us to go on like we are so long as we say we “accept” Jesus. God will whitewash us.

The true good news is better than that. The clearest chapter about it in the Bible is the one where Jesus describes not only the possibility but also the necessity of being “born again.” Nicodemus, a member of the Jewish ruling council, knew that he needed help. Seeking Jesus out by

night, he rather awkwardly began the conversation with some faint praise.

“We know you are a teacher who has come from God. . .’ In reply Jesus declared, ‘I tell you the truth, unless a man is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.’

“How can a man be born when he is old?’ Nicodemus asked, ‘Surely he cannot enter a second time into his mother’s womb to be born!’

“Jesus answered, ‘I tell you the truth, unless a man is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit.’” John 3:2-6, NIV.

Certain principles of truth that Christ expressed that night were like time bombs sown in Nicodemus’s mind that released their grand energies as time went on. A better metaphor might be that these truths were like flower seeds planted in a desert, seeds that appear to be dead until spring rains and sunshine awaken them to exuberant life.

The point is that these truths have power inherent within them; the Saviour did not tell Nicodemus that he must produce his own new birth. He went on to explain the good news that this stupendous miracle is something that the Lord does, not man. It’s discouraging for a person to be told over and over that he “must be born again,” when he thinks the job is up to him to perform somehow. No human being has ever “born” himself; he simply had to let his parents do that for him. So, says Jesus, Nicodemus must simply let the Holy Spirit perform the new birth for him:

“You should not be surprised at my saying, ‘You must be born again.’ The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear its sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going. So it is with everyone born of the Spirit.” Verses 7, 8, NIV.

#### The Divine Obstetrician

Amazing as it may seem, the good news is that the Holy Spirit does the work. That “wind” is forever blowing seeds of heavenly truth into our minds and hearts. No one is wise enough to tell where they come from, for the grace of God has been working on human hearts in multitudinous ways ever since the world began. Parents, friends, songs of praise, Bible messages heard or read, sermons, expressions of true love, all can be ways that the Lord uses to plant “good news” ideas in the heart. What is important is to recognize that their ultimate Source is God Himself. These seeds may lie deep in the heart unrecognized, but they are certain to germinate because each seed has within itself the mysterious principle of eternal life.

Here is another illustration of how the divine word of truth accomplishes its purpose:

As the rain and the snow  
    come down from heaven,  
and do not return to it  
    without watering the earth  
and making it bud and flourish,  
    so that it yields seed for the sower  
    and bread for the eater,  
so is my word that goes out from my mouth:  
    It will not return to me empty,  
but will accomplish what I desire

and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.  
Isaiah 55:10, 11, NIV.

This is actually God’s love in action. The wind blowing “wherever it pleases” is a picture of God’s compassionate concern for every human soul. Not less surely is His love manifested for you than that the wind blows on you as well. “God is no respecter of persons.” Acts 10:34.

It’s exciting, for at times you can almost feel those seeds of truth germinating within your soul like a pregnant woman can feel the new baby growing within her. What joy to experience—“I’m being born again!”

But if the new birth is so easy, why isn’t everybody born again? The answer to that question is rather sad: Many people, perhaps the majority, practice a form of spiritual abortion. They are endlessly trying to snuff out the new life that the Spirit of God would impart. This is disclosed in Stephen’s words to the Jewish leaders of his day. They were doing what comes naturally to unconverted human nature: “You stiff-necked people, with uncircumcised hearts and ears! You are just like your fathers: You always resist the Holy Spirit!” Acts 7:51, NIV. Here is active alienation or enmity against God. It doesn’t make sense for us humans to do that, but let’s face reality—that’s what we do. It’s like starving people diligently uprooting every little food-bearing plant of corn or wheat that comes up out of the ground. It’s crazy!

Jesus told a parable to illustrate the fate that most seeds of truth meet. The embryonic new life is snuffed out before it can grow.

“A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path, and the birds came and ate it up. Some fell on rocky places, where it did not have much soil. It sprang up quickly, because the soil was shallow. But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root. Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up and choked the plants.” Matthew 13:3-7, NIV. He went on to explain His story. The farmer represents Himself, sowing His seeds of “good news” truth on all human hearts everywhere. This is done through the work of the Holy Spirit, the “wind.” But, He says, it is sad that “this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes.” Verse 15, NIV. Many hearts are as hard as the packed earth beneath the tread of multitudes in the path. The seeds fall on these hard hearts but cannot take root.

“When anyone hears the message about the kingdom and does not understand it, the evil one comes and snatches away what was sown in his heart. This is the seed sown along the path. What was sown on rocky places is the man who hears the word and at once receives it with joy. But since he has no root, he lasts only a short time. When trouble or persecution comes because of the word, he quickly falls away. What was sown among thorns is the man who hears the word, but the

worries of this life and the deceitfulness of wealth choke it, making it unfruitful.” Verses 19-22, NIV.

Fortunately, some “seed fell on good soil, where it produced a crop—a hundred, sixty or thirty times what was sown.” This is “the man who hears the word and understands it.” Matthew 13:8, 23, NIV. He is the one who believes the good news, who receives it, welcomes it, cherishes it. It’s that easy. He lets it into his heart instead of inviting the birds by the wayside to snatch it up or the thorns to choke it out or the hidden “rocks” of cherished sin to dwarf its roots or performs an abortion of unbelief to kill it.

No one has yet seen what is the dynamic factor that produces the new birth. Jesus told Nicodemus in advance the story of His cross. No new birth could ever be possible without seeing and appreciating what happened on the cross:

“No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” John 3:13-15, NIV.

Jesus here alludes to an incident that took place during Israel’s wilderness wanderings. The people of Israel were journeying through the desert. There were hardships, but they made their difficulties worse by believing bad news. “The soul of the people was much discouraged because of the way. And the people spoke against God, and against Moses, Wherefore have ye brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness?” Numbers 21:4, 5.

They were not about to die; this was a specter of doom that they themselves invoked, without reason. See Psalm 105:37. Their sin was pure unbelief, borrowing troubles that were only figments of their faithless imagination.

Then the poisonous snakes struck. The people's unbelief and murmuring had deprived them of God's special protection which would have been theirs by right. Making a snake of brass and holding it up high on a pole was a prophecy of Christ to be uplifted on His cross, who was "made. . . to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him." 2 Corinthians 5:21. "The Lord said to Moses, 'Make a snake and put it on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live.' . . . Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, he lived." Numbers 21:8, 9, NIV.

Note how easy healing was: all they had to do was to look. Jesus is telling Nicodemus that there is something to see on that cross, but it is more than gazing at a crucifix. Looking is believing in the sense of a heart appreciation of what happened there. This appreciation brings healing to the sin-sick soul. And, of course, healing is the new birth. Then Jesus spoke the well-known words that have become the most loved verse of the Bible: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16, NIV.

Obviously, the power is somehow in the One on that cross. How can believing or appreciating God's

act of loving and giving do anything to change our sinful hearts?

One of Christ's followers made it clear for us how it worked for him. He expresses it as a principle that operates in every heart that will look and say, "Thank You" to God for what He did. Paul is defending himself against the charge that his all-out devotion to Christ was virtual insanity. He was going through incredible hardships and persecutions for Christ's sake, singing for joy as he went along.

The idea that he was sacrificing anything seems not to have crossed his mind. On and on he went through scourgings, imprisonments, fastings, cold and nakedness, shipwrecks, hunger, weariness. His career as a missionary went on for decades, even into old age. Why not restrain his self-sacrificing devotion, and settle down and enjoy a well-earned retirement? Wasn't it time for Paul to begin looking out for number one? But here is what he says: "Whether we be beside ourselves, it is to God: or whether we be sober, it is for your cause. For the love of Christ constraineth us; because we thus judge, that if one died for all, then were all dead [that is, all would be dead if He had not died for them]: and that he died for all, that they which live should not henceforth live unto themselves, but unto him which died for them, and rose again." 2 Corinthians 5:13-15.

Paul was not a better person than we are, nor more heroic. He simply saw something that made all his sacrifices easy. He saw that he would be in a hopeless grave if that "One" had not died in his

place. Even his next breath he owed to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. He acknowledged himself a love-slave bought by the blood shed there. Nothing that he possessed was really his. He could have sung Isaac Watts' hymn:

When I survey the wondrous cross,  
On which the Prince of glory died,  
My richest gain I count but loss,  
And pour contempt on all my pride.

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were a tribute far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my life, my soul, my all.

As easily as the believing Israelites were healed of their fatal snake bites, so easily does the new birth occur in the heart of the one who sees that cross like Paul saw it. Of course, Paul did not see it literally—he was not one of the original Twelve. He saw it by faith, and his experience is therefore an encouragement to us who also cannot see it literally. What he saw by faith seems to have made a more profound impression on him than the actual event made on those apostles that saw it. That means that the same faith-inspired devotion can be ours. Paul is better news than the other apostles!

Suppose someone looks but does not appreciate the sacrifice of Christ? That would be the famous sin of unbelief. Jesus went on to tell Nicodemus in effect that no one will ever be lost because of his past sins, but only because of that cherished sin of unbelief or hardness of heart toward the cross:

“God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.” John 3:17-19, NIV.

Thus everyone's destiny hangs on his heart-response to that cross. The new birth occurs, not by our doing this or that impossible assignment, but by simply looking with the eye of heartfelt faith at what that wondrous cross means. The healing power is in the word itself that contains the good news.

Let it come into your heart. Let it take root. Don't abort it. Cherish it. There can be no such thing as bad news unless we ask for it or choose it, and thus bring on ourselves willfully a final verdict of hanging onto darkness after we have been given the chance to see the Light.

Romans 1:14, 15.

“I am debtor both to the Greeks, and to the Barbarians; both to the wise, and to the unwise. So, as much as in me is, I am ready to preach the gospel to you that are at Rome also.”

The apostle Paul had no sympathy with those who would say, “The world owes me a living.” For such person he had only the sharpest rebuke. His command was “that if any would not work, neither should he eat.” 2 Thess. 3:10. In the language quoted above, we have the sentiment of the true

missionary—one who has given his life to the service of others.

But Paul did not take any credit to himself for his labor for others. He considered that he was simply working out a debt. To the Corinthians he wrote: “For though I preach the gospel, I have nothing to glory of; for necessity is laid upon me; yea, woe is me if I preach not the gospel!” 1 Cor. 9:16. The question is, How did Paul become a debtor to all men? and, Did any obligation rest upon him that does not rest upon every follower of Christ? The answer to both questions may be found in the Scriptures.

In the very beginning of his epistle to the Romans, Paul declared himself a servant of Jesus Christ. As we have already learned, this means that he was the life-long bond slave of Christ, yet his service was a willing service of love. He had given himself wholly to Christ, and was so closely identified with him that he was counted as a son and a brother. This is the position of every Christian. “Ye are not your own; for ye are bought with a price.” 1 Cor. 6:19, 20. First of all, then, the Christian owes himself and all that he has to Christ, because Christ has bought him with His own blood.

But the fact that we owe ourselves to Christ, and that if we acknowledge that obligation we are to identify ourselves so completely with Him that the service will not be ours but His (1 Cor. 15:10), makes us debtors to all men. For Christ “died for all;” and in carrying out His work for men, he assumes an obligation to all men, although no man had of right any claim upon Him. Paul says that

although He was in the form of God, He “made Himself of no reputation, and took upon Him the form of a servant.” Phil. 2:6, 7. And we are expressly exhorted to have this mind in us. Jesus Himself said: “Whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; and whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant; even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Matt. 20:26-28.

Christ gave His life “for the life of the world” (John 6:51); therefore everyone who yields himself to Christ, to become identified with Him and His work, becomes, like Him, a servant, not alone of the Lord Jesus, but of all for whom He became a servant. In other words, the Christian is Christ’s servant; but as Christ’s work is for the world, he who becomes a sharer of that work must become the servant of the world. Paul felt this to the utmost. He felt that he owed service to everybody that was in need; and so he did. The servant owes his service to the one who pays for it. Christ had bought the service of Paul by the sacrifice of himself; and when Paul recognized that debt to Christ and gave himself to the discharge of it, the Lord turned his service in the direction in which he himself labored. The only way to be a servant of Christ is to serve those for whom he died. Wesley had some of the same spirit that Paul had, when he said, “The world is my parish.”

The second great commandment in the law is, “Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” Our neighbor is everyone with whom we come in contact who is in need. Says Paul: “As we therefore

have opportunity, let us do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith.” Gal. 6:10. “As we have opportunity.” That indicates that we are to seek occasion of serving men, and so Paul did.

To the Romans Paul said in another place: “We then that are strong ought to bear the infirmities of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Let every one of us please his neighbor for his good to edification. For even Christ pleased not Himself.” Rom. 15:1-3. Thus again we learn that the work of Christ is to be the example for us; and He “went about doing good.” Acts 10:38. Again Paul says: “Bear ye one another’s burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.” Gal. 6:2.

The trouble with too many who profess to be followers of Christ is that they do not feel any great sense of obligation. Sometimes they talk about “getting a burden” for the work, but what is that burden? It is nothing else but a sense of the debt which we owe to Christ, and consequently to the world. If a man owes a great deal of money, and has no means with which to pay it, he will necessarily feel as though he had quite a load upon his shoulders—a burden. So all that is necessary to enable a man to have a burden for souls is for him to realize how much Christ has done for him.

The one to whom much is forgiven will love much. Paul felt himself to be the chief of sinners, and so when he felt the pardoning love of God, he felt that he owed much service. And he never forgot how much had been forgiven him, nor how great was his dependence upon God, and so he always felt the

burden of debt resting upon him. Those who have felt the burden of their sins, and who know that they are removed, will not have to strive to get a burden for souls. They will feel, like Paul, that necessity is laid upon them, and it will be the joy of their lives to discharge that obligation.