

THE GOOD NEWS IS THE BAD NEWS IS WRONG!¹

By Paul Penno Jr.
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Someone wrote, *The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong*. This hit a sensitive nerve, for it assured millions of worried citizens that their pessimistic forebodings about America's economic, political, and moral pulse were wrong. The "good news" about America was much better than they thought, said the book.

There is some news about God and your future that is far more important than political or economic fortune. All the money or political clout in the world cannot buy a moment's genuine happiness, and happiness is the name of the game. The "good news" I am talking about concerns your own personal happiness now and forever, a happiness that transcends materialism and comfortable standards of living. Such happiness fills the heart even if one must live in poverty, sickness, or loneliness. It is what millionaires long for but almost never get.

If we face reality, we must recognize that most of us have nearly given up hope that such happiness is attainable on this earth. We expect to live out our days with a nagging undertow of frustration and disappointment, even though fleeting tastes of pleasure at times apparently make life seem worth

¹ Isaiah 55:10, 11, "All Hail the Power of Jesus Name" 229, "Fairest Lord Jesus, 240.

living. But more often than we like, the undercurrent surfaces, and indefinable feelings of depression act like a riptide to sweep us into despair. The suicide rate has gone up. Teenage suicides are more than ever. We need better good news than we have heard!

The word *gospel* has the built-in meaning of "good news." We read that "Jesus came . . . proclaiming God's Good News" (Mark 1:14, 15, *The New Testament: A New Translation*, by William Barclay). His message majored in paths to happiness. He began His famous Sermon on the Mount with nine sure-cure prescriptions, each one beginning, "Happy are those who . . ." (see Matt. 5:3-12, GNB). You may be surprised to note that not one of those nine "beatitudes" tells us what to *do* in order to be "happy," as though Jesus were a guru proposing a program of works. The emphasis in Jesus' message of good news is not on doing some good thing in order to be happy, but on *believing* some "good news."

If happiness is contingent on my doing the right thing, I always run into the snag of realizing I can't do that thing just right. No matter how hard I try, there is always an element of failure or nonattainment. If God promises me something good on condition that I must first fulfill certain do-it-yourself prerequisites, His promises are bound to fall flat because I can't perform. God can promise me the sky, but it's a cruel trick if His promises are nullified by some impossible condition.

Have you ever received a junk-mail letter telling you that you have won so many thousands of

dollars, but when you read the fine print, you find you have to buy something or enter your name in a sweepstakes competition, or do some “impossible” thing before you even get in the race to win your prize? Does God’s “good news” have such a catch to it?

If so, God turns out to be as clever a deceiver as the Madison Avenue sweepstakes promoters who prey on our yearnings to win a fortune. In such a case, I stand even less chance of winning the happiness He promises than I do of winning the million-dollar jackpot in a lottery. I doubt that teenage suicides would be up if kids didn’t think that God operates as do such tricksters. Depression becomes impossible when you believe *genuine* good news.

So-called good news that is obviously phony brings no hope to a sensible person. What we want is good news that makes sense, that appeals to our innate convictions of right and wrong, that takes into account the realities of our weaknesses, that meets us where we are and solves the problem that worries us.

Is it difficult to believe Good News? Frankly, it seems like it is. According to the Bible, the root problem of mankind is that we have gotten into the rut of believing bad news so that unbelief is natural for us. Since God has nothing for us but good news, it is obvious that our proclivity for bad news (says Paul) is the result of our being both “alienated from God and . . . enemies,” so that our “sinful mind is hostile to God” (Col. 1: 21; Rom. 8:7, NIV). And none of us are *naturally* exempt, for the apostle

adds that we are all “like the rest” “in our natural condition” (Eph. 2:3, NEB). Until we have met the Lord Jesus and become acquainted with Him, this alienation results in “having their understanding darkened . . . because of . . . ignorance . . . because of . . . blindness” (Eph. 4:18).

The main problem is that this alienation for mankind in general is the result of a wrong conception of the character of God. The history of paganism demonstrates how multitudes have entertained the feeling that God is an enemy to be feared and placated in order to propitiate His mercy. Even some so-called Christian groups have had much the same idea. A mediator or mediatrix is needed to shield us from the “wrath” of an offended Deity. For sure, having such a “God” standing over you breathing hot wrath down your neck is the worst possible kind of bad news.

Today we say that we are safely past this global state of adolescence, and it is even popular in some circles to discard all idea of a personal God. But still the innate fear of bad news keeps surfacing, and all our modern comforts and inventions seem powerless to assuage our dark forebodings. The fact is that bad news has us all pretty well hyped. Modern science has not assuaged our fear of cancer, death, accidents, or personal failure.

The devil is the ultimate source of all bad news. When it comes to salvation, bad news is actually a lie the devil delights to repeat. We are told that “he is a liar, and the father of it” (John 8:44, KJV). He wants us to believe bad news, like a stalking cobra paralyzes its fear-crazed, hypnotized victim into

standing still until the serpent strikes. Bad news paralyzes the human soul, so that one can't do anything constructive towards solving the problem that appears so unsolvable. Witch doctors can paralyze superstitious victims with fear so that a simple message foretelling doom will cause the naive believer actually to lie down and die when there is no organic cause for death.

Truth is invariably good news, for the reason that there is no such thing as truth except "in love" (Eph. 4:15), and love is always *good* news. Truth comes from God. He never gives a person a message of hopeless despair.

Bad news once drove a man to suicide. The devil once paralyzed a strong man with bad news. It was King Saul of Israel. Admittedly, the poor king had rebelled against the Lord and done practically everything wrong. His kingdom was in jeopardy, and his army was dispirited while facing a hostile force of Philistines that far outnumbered Saul's troops. The king had cut off every means by which God wanted to help him in his difficulty; yet God sent him no message of doom. Saul still had the option of the path of repentance open before him.

He chose not to take it, but went to a spiritist medium instead, seeking some "wisdom" about what he could do in his utter extremity. The witch was controlled by Satan and told the horror-stricken king a series of awful calamities that "the Lord" would inflict upon him, which would bring him and the nation to utter ruin. The Lord sent him no such message, but Saul believed the witch so that her message crushed out of his soul the last tiny spark

of hope. He ended his life by suicide (see 1 Sam. 28, 31).

The Lord never drives any soul to suicide, no matter how many mistakes he or she has made. Saul could have repented and acknowledged his many sins and called the nation to prayer for deliverance, and a gracious God would have answered as He had always done in the past and would yet do in the future. Such humbling of his soul would have been infinitely better for Saul than suicide!

No matter how bad you may feel or how hopeless your outlook may appear, the Lord has some *good* news for you: "Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in Me." "Whatever you ask in My name, that I will do. . . . If you ask anything in My name, I will do it." "Peace I leave with you, My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid" (John 14:1, 13, 14, 27).

Jesus recognizes here a profound principle of psychiatry: you cannot be paralyzed by bad news unless you *choose* to *disbelieve good* news. Bad news may come ever so often knocking on your door, but it can never get inside your soul until you say "Come in." "*Let not* your heart be troubled, neither *let* it be afraid," He urges. To "let" means to give your consent. So, to "let . . . your heart be troubled" means to consent to believe Satan and his bad-news lies.

Satan has us so mixed up that we are afraid to face the truth. But the truth is always full of hope.

For example, we are afraid for the doctor to tell us the dreaded news that we have inoperable cancer, and we want to avoid facing the fact. But we forget so easily that death “in Christ” is far better than living eternally without Him. Losing one’s soul is far worse than dying. If the Lord permits us to sleep in death, the fact remains that He is still what He has always been—“God is love” (1 John 4:8). For a person lying on a death-bed, God has nothing but *good news*. What God wants him or her to understand is the truth of redemption through a Savior who died to redeem us from *eternal* death, and whose resurrection after three days is the pledge that we too shall be resurrected to endless happy life in Him. There is absolutely no situation a human being can get into where God has no good news for him, if he wants to hear good news, and is willing to listen. (Even the unpardonable sin against the Holy Spirit is a final, irrevocable choice to *disbelieve* God’s good news. It is a determined conclusive resistance of the Holy Spirit (see Matt. 12:24-35; Heb. 6:4-10).

To be forewarned is to be forearmed. Watch out for the devil’s favorite trick to crowd you off the good news freeway into a ditch of unbelief. That doesn’t need to happen if you will make a conscious choice to *believe* every scrap of good news the Lord gives you.

What is the most common sin of all mankind? Failure to believe. Not believing is what the Bible calls *unbelief*, and it has been the number one sin of the ages. Israel could not enter into their Promised Land “because of unbelief” (Heb. 4:6).

When Jesus the Great Healer visited His home town Nazareth, “he did not do many mighty works there because of their unbelief” (Matt. 13:58). Jesus told His own disciples who were stymied in their efforts to heal a desperately sick child that their “unbelief” was the problem (Matt. 17:20). It was uncanny how the multitudes could stand in the presence of the Son of God Himself, and still choose to cherish their bad news. The Scripture says that “he marveled because of their unbelief” (Mark 6:6).

Even after His resurrection, His disciples for a time preferred bad news to good, refusing to believe the testimony of eyewitnesses who knew He had risen from the dead. When He met with them, He “rebuked their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they did not believe those who had seen Him after He was risen” (Mark 16:14). I suppose those eleven disciples faced the stiffest test of believing that man has ever faced—the good news was so fantastically “impossible” that it seemed more than they could do to believe it.

Put yourself in their place. Here you are in the deepest trough of despair you have ever known, for your Saviour is *dead*, buried in a tomb; your hopes have been crushed by the most giant bulldozer of all time—the crucifixion. There is not the faintest glimmer of a ray of light at the end of your tunnel. Now, can you believe the reports of some excitable women like Mary Magdalene who say they saw Him risen from the dead? Think it through. Maybe you will want to kneel down with those “rebuked”

disciples and take your share of that divine rebuke for not believing good news!

The nation of Israel was finally “broken off” the vine “because of unbelief” and lost their prerogative as the chosen people of God (Rom. 11:19, 20). No wonder the writer of Hebrews pleads with us: “Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘Today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (Heb. 3:12, 13).

You may find yourself thinking from time to time, “That’s just too good to be true!” That’s why I say, Be careful; don’t let Satan crowd you off the road. It’s the easiest thing in the world for him to tell us all kinds of things we have to *do* in order to be saved. He has been plying that trade for thousands of years and we see evidence of it in the plethora of religions and sects that emphasize this program of “works.”

But no matter how good the works are, our problem is that we can’t do them on our own. His dirty trick is to make us think that this inability to do the good we would like to do proves that there is no real good news for us.

The best good news that a confused or despair-battered human can hear is that this moral and spiritual paralysis is a disease that has already been healed for us in the person of the Son of God. He became one of us, took on Himself our nature, actually identified Himself with our root problem of alienation from God and abolished it. Thus He established for all humanity a new identity in

Himself, irrespective of how bad our sins are. He has made alienation, sin, and fear more outmoded than caveman living. Darkness of mind is now passé, something unnecessary. In the light of what Christ accomplished, human despair has become an anachronism. God and His entire universe of light welcome us as “accepted in the Beloved” Son of God (Eph. 1:6). It staggers the mind to realize what He has done.

Paul says: “Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behavior. But now he has reconciled you by Christ’s physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation” (Col. 1:21, 22, NIV).

“But,” you say, “I’m not ‘without blemish,’ and I feel in my deepest soul all kinds of reasons why I deserve ‘accusation!’” Yes, the blemishes and the blame are still there (as they are for the vast billions of humans everywhere); but nonetheless Christ’s sacrifice in our behalf gives Him the astounding right to “present” us before the Father and His universe as “holy in *his* sight, without blemish and free from accusation.” The grand point of this tremendous good news is simply this: all the sin and darkness and pollution that still oppress us are kept going only by our continued unbelief in the good news. When we begin to exercise genuine faith, His deliverance begins immediately to be operative in our hearts and lives, and this produces changes we never thought possible. Paul goes on to say in Colossians 1:23, “Continue in the faith,

grounded and steadfast, not moved away from the hope of the gospel.”

Someone has tried to put into modern language Christ’s proclamation of what He has done: “I announce to you your redemption. Behold, I make all things new. Behold, I do what cannot be done. I restore the years that the locusts and worms have eaten. I restore to you the symphonies and operas which your deaf ears have never heard, and the snowy massif your blind eyes have never seen, and the freedom lost to you through plunder, and the identity lost to you because of calumny and the failure of justice. And I restore to you the good which your own foolish mistakes have cheated you of. And I bring to you the Love of which all other loves speak, the Love which is joy and beauty, and which you have sought in a thousand streets, and for which you have wept and clawed your pillow.”

It’s the ringing of those bells that you have despaired of ever hearing, the fulfillment of every happy dream, that is already yours in Christ, our second Adam. “Too good to be true!” shouts our implacable enemy; here is our fateful moment to decide: shall we choose to believe the good news?

A choice now to say “No” to our natural habit of believing bad news, and to say “Yes” to that whispered assurance of good news that God’s Spirit urges on you, will make a happy and dynamic experience for you.

Why does salvation come through believing Good News rather than doing good works? It’s not because of God’s arbitrary decision. Good works can’t change any human heart.

And it’s not some obscure theological mystery. Simple common sense explains it: after you get through doing everything good you can think of, you find that your original selfishness is still intact. It may be disguised so you can hardly recognize it, but history is replete with “religious” people wearing themselves out with good works who do it all for self-centered reasons. However disguised, their real motivation was racking up points for a reward. Genuine love never had a chance to get in. “If I give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames, but have not love, I gain nothing” (1 Cor. 13:3, NIV).

Phony good news would tell us that some selfishness is okay because there’s no use hoping for a genuine change of heart; it’s impossible. Just adjust your thinking. Other people are that way; why not you?

Such counterfeit good news also declares that God Himself will be content for us to go on like we are, so long as we say we “accept” Jesus. He will whitewash us in the final judgment.

Bible Good News is better. The clearest chapter about it is the one where Jesus describes being “born again.” A member of the highest ruling council, Nicodemus knew that he needed help. His hypocrisy worried him. Coming well after working hours, Nicodemus sought out Jesus “by night” for an interview. 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, no one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again.'

"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, no one can enter the kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit. Flesh gives birth to flesh, but the Spirit gives birth to spirit'" (John 3:2-6, NIV).

Some things Christ said that night were like time bombs sown in Nicodemus's mind. They released their powerful energies as time went on. A better metaphor is 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 inherent power. The Savior did not tell Nicodemus that *he* must produce his own new birth. The "you-must-be-born-again" was not a do-it-yourself enterprise. Jesus went on to explain the Good News that this miracle is what *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. No human being has ever "born" himself (excuse me; we need a new verb); he simply had to let his parents do it for him. So, says Jesus, Nicodemus let the Holy Spirit, superseding his parents, perform the new birth within 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.

Surprising as it may seem, the Good News is *very* good: (a) the Holy Spirit does the new-birth work, and (b) He will do it if you don't frustrate Him. (People who love Bad News won't like this.)

That "wind" is forever blowing seeds of heavenly truth into 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 time began. What parents have said, friends, songs of praise, Bible messages heard or read, sermons, expressions of true love—all can be ways that the Holy Spirit uses to plant "Good News" ideas in the heart.

These "seeds" may lie there deep, unrecognized for years, but they are certain to germinate because each one has within itself the mysterious principle of eternal life. Each "seed" of Good News truth "is the power of God unto salvation" (Romans 1:16).

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.

Christ's illustration of the wind blowing "wherever it pleases" is a picture of God's compassionate concern for every person. As surely as you have felt the wind blowing on your cheek, so surely is the Holy Spirit trying to convert you. "God does not show favoritism" (Acts 10:34, NIV).

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 baby growing within her. She is thrilled with new life forming. What greater joy to experience something even more wonderful—"I'm being born again!"