

YOU'VE GOT TO LEARN HOW TO BELIEVE GOOD NEWS!

**By Paul Penno Jr.
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Simon and Schuster of New York published a book by Ben J. Wattenberg entitled *The Good News Is the Bad News Is Wrong*. This book 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 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. 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 1:15, *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 Matthew 5:3-12, TEV. 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 non-attainment. 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." Colossians 1:21; Romans 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." Ephesians 2:3, NEB. Until we have met the Lord Jesus and become

acquainted with Him, this alienation results in "having the understanding darkened . . . through . . . ignorance . . . because of . . . blindness." Ephesians 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 convinced. Modern science has not assuaged our fear of cancer, of death, of accidents, or of personal failure. Surveys indicate that most American teenagers believe the bad news that they will someday die in a nuclear war, just as many teenagers in the 1930s feared they would die in a war with Nazi Germany (and many did!).

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. 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 to be unsolvable. It is a fact that witch doctors in Africa 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” (Ephesians 4:15), and love is always good news. Truth comes from God. He never gives a person a message of hopeless despair.

How Bad News Once Drove a Man to Suicide

An example of how the devil once paralyzed a strong man with bad news is 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 Samuel 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: ye believe in God, believe also in me.” “Whatsoever ye shall ask in my name, that will I do. . . . If ye shall ask any thing in my name, I will do it.” “Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto 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 Saviour 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 Matthew 12:24-35; Hebrews 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.

The most Common Sin of All Mankind

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” (Hebrews 3:6). When Jesus the Great Healer visited His home town Nazareth, “he did not many mighty works there because of their unbelief” (Matthew 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 (Matthew 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 “upbraided them with their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they believed not them which 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 “upbraided” 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. Romans 11:20. No wonder the writer of Hebrews pleads with us: “take heed, 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.” Hebrews 3:12, 13.

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 passed, 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. Ephesians 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.” Colossians 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 your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the gospel.”

Thomas Howard 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 {13} wept and clawed your pillow.”—*Christ the Tiger* (Philadelphia: Lippincott Pub. Co., 1967), p. 159.

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 chose 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, you will make have a happy and dynamic experience.