

The gospel changes everything

Acts 6-7

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The story is told of a farmer who found the egg of an eagle. Not knowing where the eagle's nest was, he took it to his barn and placed it in the midst of his chickens' eggs. Eventually the eagle egg hatched and the eagle grew up with baby chicks. He pecked the corn, fluttered his wings, and grew accustomed to the life of a chicken, bound to walking on the earth. He thought that was all life had to offer.

Then one day in the farmyard, the eagle and the chicks were playing when they noticed a majestic eagle flying high, overhead. It was only then, for the first time, that the eagle saw the life for which he was intended.

In some ways that is like the life of some Christians. They are surrounded by people who are controlled by anger, lust, greed, pride and other forms of sin. They, too, were once enslaved to sin. So, in response they see themselves as helplessly trapped in the ways of the past. But the Bible says something else:

"If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation. The old has passed away; behold, the new has come." (2 Corinthians 5:17)

The Gospel changes everything for those who will seek to understand it, submit to it, and walk in it.

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In Acts chapter 6 and 7 we read about a man by the name of Stephen. He was appointed to be one of the first deacons in the early church. He helped care for poor widows in the congregation. We are told he was a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit. He performed many miracles among the people.

Further along in chapter 6 we find these verses:

⁷And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. ⁸And Stephen, full of grace and power, was doing great wonders and signs among the people. ⁹Then some of those who belonged to the synagogue of the Freedmen (as it was called), and of the Cyrenians,

and of the Alexandrians, and of those from Cilicia and Asia, rose up and disputed with Stephen.¹⁰ But they could not withstand the wisdom and the Spirit with which he was speaking.

Many of the Jews came against Stephen, so he preached to them as the Spirit led him, and the scriptures continue with these verses:

⁵⁴ Now when they heard these things they were enraged, and they ground their teeth at him. ⁵⁵ But he, full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God. ⁵⁶ And he said, "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God." ⁵⁷ But they cried out with a loud voice and stopped their ears and rushed together at him. ⁵⁸ Then they cast him out of the city and stoned him. And the witnesses laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul. ⁵⁹ And as they were stoning Stephen, he called out, "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit." ⁶⁰ And falling to his knees he cried out with a loud voice, "Lord, do not hold this sin against them." And when he had said this, he fell asleep."

Does Stephen's last phrase sound familiar? *"Lord, do not hold this sin against them."* It sounds like Jesus . . . on the cross . . . in Luke 23:34, *"Then said Jesus, Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do."* Stephen was echoing the words of Jesus. He was living out the gospel. As rocks began to rain down on him from every direction; as they hit his mortal body with deadly accuracy; as he began to grow weaker and started to falter; as his vision blurred and blood ran freely . . . he had compassion for the souls of the enraged stone-throwers. His enemies. And he forgave. It was a beautiful picture of the gospel . . . lived out in real life.

We, too, had been the *"enemies of God"* (Romans 5:10), *"But God demonstrated His love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us"* (Romans 5:8). Now Stephen was living out this gospel of Jesus Christ, before those who could have been seen as enemies.

For Stephen, salvation was not a "one moment in time" event; it was an encounter with Jesus Christ that changed him forever . . .

All of the Christian life is focused on and propelled by the gospel of Jesus Christ. All of the Old Testament prepares the way for it and the New Testament looks back to it. The gospel is the center of all scripture and the essential center of the Christian life . . . from beginning to end.

The gospel is the truth of a holy, sovereign, just, loving and almighty God, whose creations turned against him and lived lives of sinful rebellion, against the pure King of the Universe. He rightfully could have brought immediate condemnation and destruction to all. Justice demanded that the crime be punished. The debt had to be paid. And so, it was. Yahweh, the Creator God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; the God of Moses, Joshua, David and Solomon; the God of Isaiah, Elijah, Daniel and Esther, sent his Son to be the sacrifice that paid for the sins of the world. This Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, lived a sinless life. He then willingly laid down his life and was crucified on a Roman cross. Our sin against an infinite God demanded an infinite sacrifice. In this act he took upon Himself the sin of the world and endured the wrath of God that we deserved. Three days later He was raised from the dead, victorious

over sin and death, never to die again. *“Therefore God has exalted him to the highest place and given him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father”* (Philippians 2:9-11).

This is the good news, the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is available for all who repent of their sin and believe. We celebrate salvation found in Christ, but many of us do not realize that the power of the gospel is not just our only hope for salvation, it is our only hope to live a holy life. The same truths of the gospel that usher us into salvation are the same that carry us through every day of our Christian lives.

In the story of Stephen we see evil forces come against him, even to the point of death. But by the grace of God, even when life “squeezed” Stephen, the gospel is what flowed from his life. Even in the most difficult of situations forgiveness and grace shown forth.

That is what the gospel is supposed to do in the life of a Christian. The gospel is our point of reference. It is our “north star”. It is the point from which we gauge all else. The gospel is our light that illuminates the truth of all that surrounds us. It is the lens through which we see the reality of life.

When life squeezes you, what usually comes out? When we are sinned against, mistreated, or have to endure hardship, what comes out of our lives? Is it grace, forgiveness, peace and joy, or is it anger, worry, conflict and unbelief? When life squeezes us, does some form of gospel thinking or gospel living come out of our lives?

In the case of Stephen the gospel had taken away his fear of man and his fear of death and had replaced it with faith in Christ, thoughts of eternal life, a fear of God, and a compassion for even his enemies. His life had become centered on the gospel.

At salvation the gospel introduces certain truths into our lives. These truths are not merely for salvation. They are given to enable the believer to live a life of godliness and to be made like Christ.

In the same way that *faith* brought you into salvation, faith will carry you through your Christian life as you trust in God’s provision, promises and faithfulness.

In the same way that God drew us to Himself in salvation, so will He continue to draw us to Himself as He grants conviction of sin, desire for God’s Word, compassion for other believers, and a heart that loves God and loves others.

In the same way that one’s salvation depends solely on the work of Christ, so too, does one’s sanctification depend on the work of Christ in our lives. In our weakness He is strong. Reliance on God’s grace, not our own works, will continue to empower our Christian life.

In the same way that confession and forgiveness ushered you into salvation, so too, does confession and forgiveness guard your newness of life and your intimacy with Christ each day of your Christian life.

In the same way that unconditional love laid the foundation for your salvation, so too, does unconditional love hold you securely throughout the ups and downs of your Christian life (Romans 8:31-39).

In the same way that dying-to-self brought you into salvation, so too, does a daily dying-to-self lead you into submission to Christ and a continued love of neighbor.

In the same way that *your new identity ushered you into the family of Christ*, so will your new identity be your security and righteousness in your Christian life. It frees you from the need to fear man and allows you to walk in holiness in agreement with your new nature.

The same sovereign God of the gospel who coordinated the centuries, the events, the prophecies and the details that led to Christ's coming . . . The same sovereign God who coordinated the events that drew you to faith in Jesus Christ (John 6:44), is the same sovereign God who can be trusted as we face the challenges and decisions every day of our Christian lives.

In the same way that our salvation rested firmly on the finished works of Christ, so the daily life of holiness and sanctification, too, relies on the finished works of Christ (Ephesians 2:8-9). At salvation our sin nature was removed. Our rebellious spirit was replaced. Our needs were now met. Our new hearts for obedience were received. Our sins were forgiven. We are now counted as righteous saints in the eyes of God. It is not only that we were saved from sin at the cross, we have now been equipped and empowered for holiness. Christ's death and resurrection did not only save us from the penalty of sin, it has now freed us from the power of sin. We have been justified and made righteous through Christ, but that is not all. God has guaranteed that all who are truly in the faith will be made like Christ. Sanctification is the proof of salvation.

Our inability to save ourselves continues to be true as we face the temptations and struggles of life. May our weakness continue to bring us to our knees and may God's promised strength continue to be the power by which we live. *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Corinthians 12:9). As we delight in Him, He directs and ignites the desires of our hearts (Psalm 37:4). As the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin (John 16:8) we are moved to confess our sin and are drawn into continued intimacy with Christ.

Our daily rehearsal of the gospel allows us to walk in the righteousness that has been granted us. Grace continues to move us towards repentance. The unconditional love of God continues to compel us towards good works. We have been saved, but do not be mistaken, the gospel is more than a moment-in-time event. It is a life-long, life-giving, good news relationship with God. The Gospel changes everything.

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We can now be gracious because we have received grace. We can be merciful because we have received mercy. We no longer judge others because we now see our guilt as well. We are empowered to love others because Christ first loved us. For, just as Christ condescended to our weakness and bore our

burdens so we might share in His righteousness, we understand the grace given us in Him, and rejoice, that we should do likewise and condescend to each other's weaknesses and bear each other's burdens, not add to them. It is a joyful giving of oneself because Christ, has given of himself for us.

It is a horizontal love for others that is first rooted in a vertical love for God. It is a love that emerges from a true understanding of the gospel. Our needs are met in Christ, so we are free to love others.

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When you read the book of Galatians one sees that there was infighting between the Jews and the Gentiles in the church in Galatia. Paul's remedy was the gospel.

Their conduct was not in step with the gospel. Jews acted as if they were somehow better than their fellow believers who were Gentiles. They acted as if they were more entitled to the blessings of God. They were not living in step with the truth of the gospel. The bad news of the gospel tells us of our sin and humbles the proud. The good news of the gospel tells us of God's grace and lifts up the lowly. Because of this, in Christ we are all equal in both our guilt and His grace. Regardless of race, education, finances, or gender, we were all sinners in need of grace. The gospel humbles the proud and gives hope to the lowly. The gospel alone is our foundation for community. We are now a family, one in Christ. This transforms us and the way that we relate to one another. The gospel alone has the power to bring this type of unity, especially in a church like ours.

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The gospel is the key. In the gospel we are changed and we are given the ability to love others as Christ has loved us.

As Paul David Tripp has so clearly stated:

"When you forget the gospel, you begin to seek from . . . (relationships) what you have already been given in Christ. You begin to look to (relationships) for identity, security, hope, well-being, meaning, and purpose. These are things you will only ever find vertically. They are already yours in Christ. So you have to fight to give the gospel presence in your heart. Also, when you live out of the grace of the gospel, you quit fearing failure, you quit avoiding being known, and you quit hiding your struggles and your sin."¹

If we remind ourselves of the gospel at the beginning of every day we are humbled by our sin, our sinfulness and our brokenness. Pride is set aside and we no longer think more highly of ourselves than we ought. As Jesus instructed us to do in Matthew 7, we first take note of the log of sin in our own eye before we judge the speck in someone else's eye. As we once again have been reminded of the "bad news" of the gospel, we then are lifted up with the "good news" of the gospel. We have been forgiven. We are loved. We have been adopted. We are secure. Christ is in us and we are in Him. We no longer have to earn love or perform for the approval of man. We can stand strong, even in the most difficult of

¹ Paul Tripp, "Pastoral Ministry is War." Accessed August 18, 2013, <http://thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/tgc/2011/08/08/pastoral-ministry-is->

external circumstances, because our strength, our joy, our hope and our peace now come from within. We are in Christ. Our Father treasures us, cares for us, provides for us and loves us. We are secure . . . So, we no longer need to devour each other, or put others down to raise ourselves up, or brag about what we have done so everyone knows, or be broken if we don't succeed in some earthly endeavor. Our lives are built upon the rock, and though storms may come and floods may rise, we are held firm on the foundation of Christ.

Suppose there is a Christian man who in many areas of his life is honoring God, but who has traditionally had an anger problem. He is becoming more and more convicted of his sin in this area. He wants to change but in his mind there is a tug of war happening. He confesses his sin to God . . . again. He thinks of his past and thinks He surely cannot change. He then looks at the gospel and is reassured that we are a new creation: *"The old is passed away; behold, the new has come"* (2 Corinthians 5:17). Therefore, his past can no longer condemn him, define him, enslave him or determine his future. He is no longer bound to the same relational mistakes he has made in the past. In the gospel he recognizes his own guilt. In Christ he finds the ability to evaluate his struggle and forgive as Christ forgave him. He puts his faith in Christ to finish what He has begun in His life. He confesses his need to other trustworthy men who graciously hold him accountable. He shares with his wife and children, and they begin to join him in prayer and encouragement. He draws near to God's Word and begins to be strengthened spiritually by it. He surrenders daily his anger and his heart, and gradually God begins to change his desires and the anger begins to fade away. This man is becoming more gospel-centered.

Another example is a secondary student. She became a Christian a couple of years ago, but she is struggling as many teenagers do. She is not the most attractive, smart, athletic, or popular. She really wants the approval of her classmates and is being tempted to cheat, swear, dress inappropriately and do numerous things that are not becoming of a follower of Christ. She is stuck in the middle. She really wants the approval of her classmates, but how does the gospel affect this situation?

Through the death of Christ, God has already declared the value of this young lady. She was bought with a price. She is a child of the King. She is a precious treasure to the God of the universe. God has a calling on her life and has prepared a place for her in eternity. She is loved unconditionally and nothing can separate her from this love of God. She belongs. She is valuable. She is loved.

As she reviews the truths of the gospel she begins to be swayed back towards God. She shares her struggle with her parents and with a few other adult Christian women who she really respects. They all begin to pray for her and check on her periodically. She begins to evaluate the friends that she has and begins to nurture the relationships that help her to honor God. She begins to read her Bible regularly. She begins to find a way that she can serve others. She periodically takes time to stop and list out the things for which she is thankful. She begins taking more time researching what God will have her do with her life in the future. She gets more involved in her church. She spends less time on social media, since it tends to stir a discontentment and covetousness in our hearts, where we constantly pursue "more likes and more friends." As God increases her faith in Christ and her desire for Him grows, her desire for popularity begins to decrease and the temptation loses its power. This young lady is being changed by the gospel.

Imagine another situation. A Christian woman who has had years of bitterness against her parents. She was treated badly when she was growing up and has never been able to forgive them. She knows that she should forgive them, but feels that if she forgives them, they will have won. That somehow, they will be getting away with it. So, she has never forgiven them. But the nearer she draws to the gospel she can't help but realize the full extent of her own sin. She is reminded of her own rebellion against a holy God, and the unbelievable forgiveness that He granted her. She no longer can function as if she is the "innocent one" or the righteous judge. Her sin has disqualified her from both. She, too, is guilty and has been forgiven much. She knows she should forgive. She now has a fuller understanding of the gospel in her mind, but how does she get the gospel to take root in her heart? Only God can do that, but he has given us ways to prepare the soil. Out of her longing for reconciliation with her parents and a desire to be freed from the bondage of bitterness, she begins to obey God's Word. She begins to read God's Word daily. She shares with a couple of other Christian friends who she really trusts. She begins to pray for God to bless her parents. She begins to reach out to them, even though in the beginning it is still somewhat superficial. She continues to cry out to God to change her heart . . . and eventually He does. She forgives and becomes free.

Another example of the gospel's impact on relationships can be found in how a single Christian approaches getting married. The gospel has already determined her worth, her belonging and that she is unconditionally loved. Because of this she is in a good place spiritually. She does not have to be desperate. She does not have to measure her worth based on her marital status, people's opinion or the outcome of a date. She does not have to pursue a relationship by dressing immodestly or lowering her commitment to holiness. She trusts in the sovereignty of God and clings to the fact that as she seeks God first He will bless her whether she is single or married. As she revels in God's acceptance, the acceptance of the other person is important but is secondary. If God leads her into a lasting relationship, good, but if not, she will be okay because her joy is in God.

If she knows that through the gospel she has Christ and that He is her everything, then she can accept the outcome of possible romantic relationships because her life is built upon Christ, and nothing will ever separate her from His love. But remember this, even if she finds Mr. or Mrs. Right, no one is truly perfect, and she will never stop needing the gospel. Those of you who are married know exactly what I am talking about.

The need for the gospel extends to our marriages. Some days of marriage are heavenly, and others are not. Marriage is beautiful and gut-wrenching. You have entrusted your heart to someone for the rest of your lives. Because of this they have the power to love you like no other, but they also have the power to hurt you like no other. In these moments we must return to the gospel. There we see that we are not innocent, that we have no right to be the judge, that our spouse is imperfect and sinful just as we are, that Christ is our only hope for healing and the only one who can meet our deepest needs. As we are safe in Him it becomes possible to humble ourselves before each other and seek reconciliation. He is our confidence and our security. He is our source of hope during our pain and in the midst of our sin. Once again, our needs lead us back to the gospel.

In regard to work, in the gospel we find purpose in our day-to-day lives as we are called to be on mission with God. No longer do we work merely to pay the bills. We enter our workplace every day knowing that we are torchbearer's, taking the light of Christ to a dark and dying world. We find hope in God, who uses even life's difficulties to grow in us character, faith, and a fuller understanding of His grace (Romans 5:1-5). As we view our coworkers from a gospel perspective we see them as a people to be loved, as blind to the gospel, and as a people in need of a savior.

It is helpful and encouraging to know the benefits of being a child of God, but the essential point of this is to abide with Him. To walk in the Spirit. Just as an orphan child benefits as he stays near his parents, so do we reap all the benefits of the gospel as we draw near to our heavenly Father. In that relational connection you will gain everything that He has to offer, even if you don't know exactly what all the benefits are.

Our daily rehearsal of the gospel allows us to practically walk in the righteousness that has been granted us. Grace continues to move us towards repentance. The unconditional love of God continues to compel us towards good works. We have been saved, but do not be mistaken, the gospel is more than a one moment-in-time event. It is a life-long, life-giving, relationship with God. As we, daily, plug in to God's Word, pray, and share life with other believers, we will find ourselves more and more filled with the truths of the gospel and prepared to let it pour out of our lives.

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In closing, let me encourage you to live out the gospel . . . never knowing what will result from your faithfulness. We started out our talking about Stephen, the man who forgave those who were stoning him to death. There is one more interesting detail in that story. In verses 57-58, as Stephen was about to be stoned, it says this:

"Then they cried out with a loud voice, and stopped their ears, and ran upon him with one accord, and cast him out of the city, and stoned him: and the witnesses laid down their clothes at a young man's feet, whose name was Saul."

This young man, named Saul, would eventually become the apostle Paul who would pen more of the New Testament than any other writer. He would write out the mystery of the gospel so that we could understand what God has done for us.

We do not know all of the steps that God used to draw Saul to Himself, but this one event was noteworthy enough that it was recorded for us in the scriptures. The ripple effect from Stephen's death that day changed eternity on a greater scale than he would ever have imagined. May God do the same through us as we live out the gospel of Jesus Christ.