

In His Letter to the Romans

by T. Austin-Sparks

The gospel is the central message of the New Testament, offering hope to both the unsaved and the saved, and it is the ultimate solution to the hopeless situation of human heredity and religious tradition.

Scripture: Romans 8:29, Romans 12:12, Romans 15:13, 1 Corinthians 15:1, Galatians 1:11, Galatians 2:2, Ephesians 2:8, Hebrews 6:18, Revelation 13:8

Topics: "The Gospel", "Eternal Hope"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delves into the essence of the gospel, emphasizing its significance as 'good news' that covers the entire New Testament, touching every aspect of the Christian life. The gospel is not limited to conversion but encompasses the profound truths in letters like Ephesians and Colossians, revealing hope from beginning to end. By exploring the eternal perspective of the gospel, he highlights how the Cross of Christ transcends time, securing hope in a seemingly hopeless situation, and anchoring believers in the immensity of God's eternal provision.

Transcript

"...the gospel which I preach..." (Gal. 2:2).

"Now I made known unto you, brethren, the gospel which I preached unto you..." (1 Cor. 15:1).

"For I make known to you, brethren, as touching the gospel which was preached by me, that it is not after man" (Galatians 1:11).

"The gospel which I preach". "The gospel which was preached by me".

There are in the New Testament four main designations for the basic matter with which it deals, the vital truth with which it is concerned, and those four designations are The Gospel, The Way, The Faith, and The Testimony. That which has now come to be known as 'Christianity' was then expressed by one or other of those designations. Of these four, the one used more than any other is the first - The Gospel. That title for the inclusive message of the New Testament occurs there at least one hundred times - that is, in the noun form, 'the Gospel'. In the corresponding verb form it occurs many more times, but unrecognised by us, because it is translated by several different English words. The verb form of this very same Greek word appears in our translation as 'to declare', 'to preach', 'to preach the gospel'. It would sound very awkward if you were to give a literal translation to this verb form. It would be just this - 'to gospel', 'to

gospel people', 'to gospel the kingdom', or, to take the meaning of the word, 'to good-news', 'to good-tidings', and so on. That sounds very awkward in English, but in Greek that is exactly what was said. When they preached they conceived themselves as 'good-newsing' everything and everybody. To preach the gospel was simply to announce good tidings.

It is impressive that this word, this title, for the Christian faith - 'the gospel' - abounds in twenty of the twenty-seven books of the New Testament. The exceptions are: the Gospel by John, where you will not find it, nor will you find it in the three letters of John. You will not find it in Peter's second letter, nor will you find it in James or Jude. But these writers had their own titles for the same thing. We mentioned amongst the four, 'The Testimony': that is John's peculiar title for the Christian faith - often, with him, 'The Testimony of Jesus'. With James and Jude it is 'The Faith'. But you see how preponderating is this title of 'the good news', 'The Gospel'.

The Range of the Term 'The Gospel'

So we have to take account quite early of a most important fact. It is that this term, the good news, covers the entire range of the New Testament, and embraces the whole of what the New Testament contains. It is not just those certain truths which relate to the beginning of the Christian life. The gospel is not confined to the truths or doctrines connected with conversion and, in that limited sense, salvation - the initial matter of becoming a Christian. The gospel goes far beyond that. I repeat, it embraces all that the New Testament contains. It is as much the gospel in the profound letters to the Ephesians and the Colossians as it is in the letter to the Romans - perhaps no less profound a document, but often regarded as being mainly connected with the beginnings of the Christian life.

No, this term, the 'good tidings', covers the whole ground of the Christian life from beginning to end. It has a vast and many-sided content, touching every aspect and every phase of the Christian life, of man's relationship to God and God's relationship to man. It is all included in the good tidings. The unsaved need good news, but the saved equally need good news, and they constantly need good news. Christians constantly need some good news, and the New Testament is just full of good news for Christians. The servants of the Lord need good news. They need it as their message, the substance of their message. They need it for their encouragement and support. How much the Lord's servants need good news to encourage them in the work, and support in all the demand and cost of their labours! The Church needs good news for its life, for its growth, for its strength, for its testimony. And so the gospel comes in at every point, touches every phase.

Now as to our present method in the pages which follow. I would ask you to follow me carefully, and to grasp what I am trying to say by way of the foundation of this word. We are going to pursue what I am going to call the 'resultant' method: that is, to elicit the conclusion of the whole matter, rather than the particular aspect of any one portion of the New Testament.

Let me illustrate. Take, for instance, the letter to the Romans, which we are going to consider in a moment. We all know that that letter is the grand treatise on justification by faith. But justification by faith is shown to be something infinitely greater than most of us have yet grasped or understood, and justification by faith has a very wide connotation and relationship. All that is contained in this letter to the Romans resolves itself into just one glorious issue, and that is why it begins with the statement that what it contains is 'the gospel'. "Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, separated unto the gospel of God... concerning his Son". Now all that follows is 'the gospel' - but what a tremendous gospel is there!

And we have somehow to sum it all up in one conclusion. We have to ask ourselves: 'After all, what does result from our reading and our consideration of this wonderful letter?' You see, justification is not the beginning of things, neither is it the end of things, justification is the meeting point of a vast beginning and a vast end. That is, it is the point at which all the past eternity and all the future eternity are focused. That is what this letter reveals.

The God of Hope

Let us now look at it a little more closely in that particular light. What is the issue, what is the result? That result is gathered up into one word only. It is a great thing when you can get hold of a big document like this and put it into one word. What is the word? Well, you will find it if you turn to the end of the letter. It is significant that it comes at the point where the Apostle is summing up. He has written his letter, and he is now about to close. Here it is.

"Now the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, that ye may abound in hope" (Rom. 15:13).

If your margin is a good one, it will give you references to other occurrences of that word in this same letter. You will find it as early as chapter 5, verse 4; you find it again in chapter 8, verses 24 and 25; again in chapter 12, verse 12; and then in the fifteenth chapter - first in verse 4, and finally here in our passage, verse 13. "The God of hope". That is the word into which the Apostle gathers the whole of this wonderful letter. This, then, is the gospel of the God of hope; more literally, the 'good news', or the 'good tidings', of the God of hope. So that what is really in view in this letter from start to finish is hope.

A Hopeless Situation

Now, quite obviously, hope has no meaning and makes no sense except in the light of the contrary - except as the contrary exists. The Divine method in this letter, therefore, in the first instance, is to set the good tidings over against a hopeless situation, in order to give clear relief to this great word - this ultimate issue, this conclusion, this result. A very, very hopeless situation is set forth. Look at the Divine method in this. The situation is set forth in two connections.

(a) In the Matter of Heredity

Firstly, it is exposed in regard to the race - the whole matter of heredity. If we look at chapter 5, with which we are so familiar, we see that there the whole race is traced back to Adam - "as through one man..." (verse 12). The whole race of mankind is traced right back to its origin and fountain-head in the first Adam. What is made clear in this chapter is this. There was a disobedient act through unbelief, resulting in the disruption of man's relationship with God. "Through the one man's disobedience" (verse 19), Paul puts it - not only here, but in his letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 15:21,22). And hence all men issuing from that man, Adam, became involved in that one act of disobedience and in its consequences - mainly the disruption of the relationship between man and God.

But that is not all. What immediately followed, as the effect of that act, was that man became in his nature disobedient and unbelieving. It was not just one isolated act which he committed, not just one thing into which he fell for a moment. Something went out of him, and something else entered into him, and man became by nature a disobedient and unbelieving creature. Not only did he act in that way, but he became that; and from that moment the very nature of man is unbelieving, the nature of man is disobedience. It is

in his constitution, and all men have inherited that.

This is something that cannot be adjusted, you see. When you have become a certain kind of being, lacking a certain factor, you cannot adjust. You cannot adjust to what is not there. No man can believe unless it is given him of God to believe. Faith is 'not of ourselves, it is the gift of God' (Eph. 2:8). No man can be obedient to God apart from a mighty act of God in him causing him to be of an obedient nature or disposition. You cannot adjust to something that is not there. So the situation is pretty hopeless, is it not? Something has gone, and something else which is the opposite of that has come in and taken its place. That is the condition of the race here. What a picture of hopeless despair for the whole race! That is our heredity. We are in the grip of that.

You will, of course, agree that in other realms, in other departments of life, heredity is a pretty hopeless thing. We often use the very hopelessness of it as a line of argument by which to excuse ourselves. We say, 'It is how I am made: it is no use you trying to get me to do this - I am not made that way'. You are only arguing that you have in your constitution something that makes the situation quite impossible. And let me take this opportunity of emphasizing that it is quite hopeless for us to try to find in ourselves that which God requires. We shall wear ourselves out, and in the end come to this very position which God has laid down, stated and established - it is hopeless! If you are struggling to be a different kind of person from what you are by nature, trying to get over what you have inherited - well, you are doomed to despair: and yet how many Christians have never learned that fundamental lesson! For the whole race, heredity spells hopelessness. If this needs focusing at all, we have only to consider the conflict and battle that there is over believing God, having faith in God. You know that it is a deep work of the Spirit, of God in you that brings you, either initially or progressively, to believe. It is the "so-easily-besetting sin" - unbelief - followed, of course, by inability to obey. We are crippled at birth; we are born doomed in this matter by our heredity.

(b) In the Matter of Religious Tradition

Then the Lord takes this thing into another realm. I hope you recognise the meaning of the background, the dark background, against which this word 'hope' is placed. The Spirit of God through the Apostle takes it into the realm of religious tradition, as exemplified by the Jews. Everything now for them is traced back to Abraham and to Moses. What a lot the Apostle has to say about Abraham and his faith - "Abraham believed" - and then about Moses, and the Law coming in. And here is something of tremendous significance and importance that we must note, for here we see the particular function that was in view in God's sovereign choice of the Jewish nation. Have you ever thought of it like this? There are many things that could be said about the Jewish nation, their past, present and future, but what comes out so definitely here is their function in the sovereignty of God. It was, and still is, their function, so far as testimony is concerned, that is, the witness of their history. It was to show just one thing. You can have a grand father - I do not mean a grandfather! - and you may have the best religious tradition; but nothing of that is carried over in your heredity, that is, it does not pass into your nature.

What a father was Abraham! What a lot is made of "Abraham our father"! What a magnificent specimen of faith and obedience was Abraham! They were all of the stock of Abraham; as a nation, they derived from Abraham. And what a system was the Jewish system of religion, so far as standard is concerned, a moral, ethical, religious standard. There is nothing that can improve upon it in the religions of the world. What a magnificent system of religious precept was the Jewish religion, which came in through Moses! - not only the ten commandments, but all the other teaching that made up the Law, covering every aspect of man's life. And they were the children of that: yet what do you find here? You do not find the faith of Abraham in

them, and you do not find the reflection of that great system in them, in their nature. These very people, deriving from such a one as Abraham, and being the inheritors of all those oracles of the Mosaic system, in their natures are devoid of everything that is represented by Abraham and Moses. These people are still characterized by - what? unbelief, in spite of Abraham; disobedience, in spite of Moses! What could be more hopeless?

Some people have the idea that, if they have a good father and a good mother, that puts them in a very secure position, but human nature does not bear witness to that. There may be advantages in having had godly forebears - some advantages; but it is no final guarantee that you are going to escape all the difficulties and all the conflicts and all the sufferings of getting your own faith. The fact is that parents can be utter for God, they can be the most godly, the most pious, and yet their children can be the most renegade. A strange thing, is it not? The disposition to faith and obedience is not in the blood. Religious tradition of the best kind does not change our nature. It may go back for generations - it does not change our nature. We are still unbelieving and disobedient in nature, however good our parents were. You may have prayed from the beginning for a loved child, from the time that it was the smallest babe; you may have sought to live before it for God: and yet here is that child self-willed, disobedient - everything else.

Hope in a Desperate Situation

How desperately hopeless this situation is! But that is the way in which the Lord establishes a setting for this tremendous thing that is called hope. And so we come to the transcendent solution, and I use that word carefully at this point, for here is something very great. This is an immense mountain, this mountain of heredity: but there is something that transcends the whole, gets above it all; a solution which rises above the whole hopelessness and despair of the natural situation; and that is what is called 'the gospel'. Oh, that must be good news! Indeed that is why it is called 'good news'! Good news! What is it? There is hope in this most desperate situation.

The Gospel in Eternity Past

Now, if we look at this letter again as a whole, we shall find that the good news, or the good tidings, of the gospel is not only in the Cross of the Lord Jesus - though that is the focal point of it, as we shall see in a moment. The good news, or the gospel, is found to be something very, very much bigger even than the Cross of the Lord Jesus! What is that? It is "the good tidings of God... concerning his Son... Jesus Christ our Lord". The Cross is only one fragment of the significance of Jesus Christ Himself.

So this letter, what does it do? It takes us right into the eternity of the Son of God. This is wonderful, if you grasp it. If this gospel does not save you, I do not know what will. Here we are taken right back into the past eternity of the Son. "Whom he foreknew, he also foreordained to be conformed to the image of his Son" (Rom. 8:29). He must have had His Son, the Master-Pattern, there in view before ever man was created, the eternal, the timeless, Pattern that the Son was: before there was any need of redemption, atonement, the Cross, the Son was the eternal Pattern of God for man. And, mark you, it is so positive, so definite. It is in that tense which means a definite, once-for-all act. "Whom he foreknew, he also foreordained". It is something which was done before time was. That is where the gospel begins.

Yes, we see the Son in His eternity as God's timeless Pattern; and then we have the eternity or timelessness of the redeeming sovereignty. The redeeming sovereignty is included in that. 'He foreordained, He called, He justified, He glorified'. Now these three remaining things are not subsequent. They all belong to the same time - which is not time at all; it is eternity. It does not say that He foreknew

and foreordained, and then in course of time He called and He justified and He glorified. You see what you are committed to if you take that view. Most of us have been called and justified, but we are not glorified yet. But it says 'He glorified', in the 'once-for-all' (aorist) tense.

This must mean, then, that when He took this matter in hand in relation to His timeless Pattern, the Lord Jesus, He finished it all in sovereign purpose and intention. It was all rounded off then, so that the marred vessel is an incident in time; a terrible incident, a terrible tragedy, that the vessel was marred in the hand of the Potter; but, for all that, an incident in time. God's counsels transcend all that has come in in time. Dear friend, when the Lord projected the whole plan of redemption, it was not because something had happened calling for an emergency movement to try to save the situation on the spot. He had already anticipated the whole thing, and had got everything in hand to meet the contingency. The Lamb was "slain from the foundation of the world" (Rev. 13:8). The Cross reaches back over all time, right back over all sin, over the fall, over the first Adam - right back to the eternal Son, before times eternal. The Cross goes back there - to "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world".

What great hope is here! If that is true, if we can grasp that, that is good news, is it not? We make everything of the situation in ourselves which is so hopeless; God makes everything of His Son to meet our hopelessness. And God is not experimenting because something has gone wrong - 'We must find some kind of remedy for this, we must find something with which we can experiment to see if we can meet this emergency; man has gone sick, and we must look round for a remedy.' No; God has already covered it from eternity, met it from eternity, in His Son. It is the gospel, the good news, of God "concerning his Son". This may raise a number of mental problems, but here is the statement of this book. Hope, you see, is not destroyed because Adam falls: hope reaches back beyond man's sin.

You say, 'Then what about the Cross?' Well, the Incarnation and the Cross are only effecting what was settled in eternity - bringing out of eternity into time in a practical way, making effectual for man in his desperately needy condition, that great purpose, intention, design of God concerning His Son. The Cross is the means which lifts right up out of the trough, the valley, of human sin and failure, on to the level of the eternal counsels of God, and restores the even course of that which ultimately is eternally unaffected by what has happened in time. Tremendous good news, that, is it not? The Cross becomes the occasion of faith by which all this is transcended - of course it provides the ground for our faith - and when faith acts in relation to the Cross, what happens? We are brought into Christ: not brought into the Jesus of three and a half years, or even of thirty years, but brought into Christ as representing God's timeless thought for man. Faith brings us into that. That is the good news, "the good news concerning his Son"; the gospel, the good news of "the God of hope".

You see, hope is founded upon God's eternal provision outside of time: and that is a very safe rock upon which to stand! Yes, founded upon the eternal rock of Christ's Sonship, not upon an after-thought and an after-measure to meet something that has happened unexpectedly. Hope is grounded and anchored outside of time. The Apostle, writing to the Hebrews, uses a picture, a metaphor. "The hope... which we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and stedfast and entering into that which is within the veil" (Heb. 6:18,19); taking you outside of time, outside of this life, anchoring you there in eternity. How great is the Cross! How great is the message of Romans 6! It takes us right back beyond Moses, Abraham and Adam. It takes us right back past Adam's sin and failure, and the whole race's hopeless condition. The Cross takes us back before it all, and there in the past eternity links us up with what God intended. The Cross secures that. And with the other hand the Cross reaches right on into eternity to come, and says, "Whom he foreknew... them he also glorified" (Rom. 8:29,30). The Cross secures the coming eternal glory.

How great is the Cross!

Hope, then, is resting upon the immensity of the Cross. Hope rests upon the fact that Christ, who passed this way, becoming the last Adam, being made sin for us, bearing it all, now raised by God, is seated at God's right hand, and therefore that we, as "in Christ" have been placed beyond any risk of another fall. I always think that this is one of the most blessed factors in the gospel - that Jesus in Heaven now, having been this way and the way of His Cross, says that this Adam will never fail. There will never be another fall. This heredity is secure, is safe, because linked with Him. There is no fear of our being involved in any more falls of that kind, no fear at all. It is indeed a wonderful hope, this gospel of the God of hope!

Do you see how very vividly the dark picture of hopelessness is drawn? I have only given you the outline, but you look at the details - the terrible picture of the Gentiles and the Jews drawn in the first chapters of this letter, and the hopelessness of the situation for both. Yes, despair indeed - and then over it all written, Hope! The good news of hope stands over it all, in spite of it all, because hope rests upon God having before all things determined upon something which He will carry out, and which He has demonstrated by the Cross of His Son, Jesus Christ. You and I know, do we not, that when faith has acted in relation to the Cross of the Lord Jesus, something begins in us which reverses altogether the natural course of things. Now faith is growing, faith is developing; we are learning the way of faith, we are being enabled to trust God more and more. Everything has changed: obedience is now possible.

And there is another life, another nature, another power, in us, which has made for hope. A contradiction of the Christian faith is a despairing Christian, a hopeless Christian; one who is not marked by this great thing which is pre-eminently characteristic of God - hope. He is "the God of hope". The Lord make this true, that we are filled with hope, "rejoicing in hope". "Patient in tribulation" but "rejoicing in hope" (Rom. 12:12).

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