

I wonder if you can remember the first time you ever heard the gospel proclaimed or declared or explained.

The earliest memory I have of the gospel being told to me goes back to when I was a little kid, just three or four years old.

I was going to preschool during the week, and one day at preschool there was a craft activity involving safety scissors.

The teacher asked us to put our hands up if we had never used a pair of scissors before.

I hadn't, but there was no way I was going to admit in front of all my friends that I had never used a pair of scissors.

So I kept my hand down, I concealed the embarrassing truth, and I decided I'd just go with the fake it till you make it strategy.

I did, it worked out for me, the paper got cut, the craft got made, except for the fact that I went home feeling terribly guilty about the concealment of the truth that I had perpetrated.

That was on Wednesday, I think.

And then on Sunday morning, my guilt feelings got worse, because there was an amplifier box at church, we were in the red brick building back then, it was on the left hand side, about half way back, just kind of sitting on a pew.

And I had been told, never to touch it.

And then in a moment of curiosity, waiting around for church to start, I kind of snuck up to it, I gave it a little shove, just to see what would happen.

Again, I got away with it.

But I felt so guilty, that I had broken the rule, I had transgressed the commandment, I had put everyone at risk.

Some sort of terrible disaster, by touching the amplifier box.

The guilt stayed with me all day.

So I unburdened myself that evening to mum, Sunday nights in those days, dad would come off to church to play the organ and count the offering, and I'd stay home with my sister, and mum would read to us, and the time came around for evening prayers.

And I unburdened myself, my guilty conscience to mum, and to her credit, she took me very seriously.

And she told me that it wasn't just me, we were all sinners, herself included, and the good news of the Gospel, she said, was that Jesus, our Saviour, had died on the cross so that our sin could be forgiven and washed away, taking our punishment for us, so that if we confessed our sins, he was faithful and just and would forgive us our sins, cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

So I confessed my sins to God, and I asked for his forgiveness, and I went to sleep with a clear conscience.

That is my oldest, earliest memory of having the good news of the Gospel explained to me.

And I remain thankful to this day for the way in which my mum, on that occasion and on many, many other subsequent ones in which I gave her opportunity, told me the story of Jesus and the good news of what he had done for me.

But do you notice how small my original grasp of the Gospel was?

According to my earliest understanding of it, the Gospel was a message that was all about the forgiveness of the individual sins committed by individual sinners like me.

Like the way I covered up the truth about my lack of scissor experience and made unauthorised contact with the amplifier box.

And it is true, absolutely wonderfully true, that the good news of the Gospel as it unfolds in the story of Jesus that is told by the evangelists, by Matthew, Mark, Luke and John, as it is foreshadowed in the Old Testament, as it is declared and applied in the letters of the New Testament, it is absolutely true that the good news of the Gospel contains wrapped up within it, the wonderful promise of the forgiveness of sins to all who turn and trust in Jesus.

In him, as Paul says in the final verse of the paragraph, just before the one we heard a moment ago, in him we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

But the forgiveness of my own individual personal sins, is as wonderful and as important and as essential as that is.

The forgiveness of my own individual personal sins is not the totality of the gospel.

Sometimes we preach it and we explain it and we sing about it as if that were the case.

And when we do that, when we fall back into that habit and that pattern, we leave ourselves open to all kinds of reductions and distortions and mutations of the Christian faith and we miss out on the length and the breadth and the height and the depth of what God wants us to know and to believe and to live by as people who confess the Lord Jesus.

And in this portion of Colossians that we're looking at together this morning, Paul gives us a magnificent preventative against that kind of gospel reductionism.

Paul reminds us of the vast, enormous scope of the content and the entailments of the gospel that we have believed and lived by.

So we're going to spend a few minutes this morning focusing our thoughts on the big, enormous gospel that Paul preached, and reflecting on a couple of the reasons why it is important that we don't reduce the gospel message down to something smaller than that.

I said a moment ago that the passage we read out a little earlier is the, heard a moment ago actually, is the one we'll be focusing on this morning, and that's true.

But before we get there, before we start at verse 15, I want to take a moment just quickly to remind us of the verses that come immediately before it, the last two verses of the preceding paragraph.

Because already, already there in verse 13 and verse 14, in the final verses of Paul's prayer report, as he tells the Colossians what he prays for when he prays for them, already we see him beginning to unpack some of the content of the gospel that the Colossians have believed, and which was growing and bearing fruit among them.

So he writes verse 13, for he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness, and has transferred us into the kingdom of the son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

Did you notice already in verse 13 and verse 14, before we even get to our passage, the way that the Gospel Paul reminds the Colossians of, involves not only the forgiveness of their individual sins, that is wrapped up within it, but also a transformation of the relationship they have to the powers that they used to live under.

A rescue, as Paul puts it, from the dominion of darkness.

And did you notice how that rescue, that redemption from, that Paul speaks of, went hand in hand with a transfer of belonging and allegiance into something new, into the kingdom of the Son whom he loves, verse 13.

Or in the language of verse 12, into the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light.

Already in those last couple of verses of the preceding paragraph, we start to get the beginnings of the idea that the gospel we have believed is something so much bigger than just a pack of spiritual band-aids to put on the top of the individual sins that we commit, to help us resolve the guilt that we feel about them.

Already in verse 13 and verse 14, we get to begin to get a sense that the gospel cannot be reduced down to just a spiritual remedy for our personal sins that leaves unaltered the way we live our lives and the way we relate to the powers that rule and dominate our world, the powers under whose dominion we used to live our lives.

Already in verses 13 to 14, it is beginning to become clear that something bigger is at stake.

And then in the passage we are looking at today, in verses 15 to 23, Paul makes clear the reason why that is the case.

And the reason in a word is Christ.

Because of who it is that the gospel proclaims.

Because of who it is in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

The redemption and forgiveness that we have can never be understood as just a bandaid for our cuts and scrapes, or a get out of hell pass for individual sinners.

The gospel is much bigger than that because of who it is that the gospel is all about.

Listen again to the first few verses of our passage.

Verse 15, Paul writes, The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

For in him, all things were created, things in heaven and on earth, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities, all things have been created through him and for him.

He is before all things.

And in him, all things holds together.

And he's the head of the body, the church.

There was a long tradition among Jewish writers in the second temple period, that is in the period after the return from exile and the rebuilding of the temple under Zerubbabel and Haggai.

There was a tradition among Jews in the period up to and including the time when Paul is writing, to speak about the way in which the world we live in, the visible world, the stars above and the moon and the sun and the planet we walk on, the world we live in is shaped and ordered and held together by the wisdom and the word of God.

Over and over again, Jewish writers from Paul's day and the preceding century or two write about the wisdom and the word of God, sometimes God's personified wisdom and his personified word, as his image and as his first born, the beginning and the coherence of the cosmos.

Philo of Alexandria, for instance, to choose a couple of instances from the many, many similar things that he says in his writings, speaks about the word of God as his shadow, which he made use of like an instrument, and thus made the world.

Or as his image, through which the whole universe was framed, so that the entire universe is stamped with his image and ideal form.

If you went to Philo and you asked him, this invisible God of yours, who has no statue in his temple, how do you see him?

How does he become visible?

Philo would say, well, look out the window.

Look at the stars.

Look at the earth beneath your feet.

Look at all of the ways in which the reality you experience is ordered and structured in all its symmetries and intricacies and magnificence in all of its dimensions, structured and ordered and given its coherence by the rationality, the wisdom, the mind, the thoughts of its creator stamped upon the visible things that he has made.

In a similar way, we read in the wisdom of Jesus Ben Sirach, another Jewish writing from the period, by his word, the word of God, the word of Yahweh, all things holds together.

In the wisdom of Solomon, a pseudonymous book not written by Solomon himself, not in the Old Testament, but from somewhere in the mid first century BC to about Paul's day, somewhere in that period, the writer has Solomon say, I learned both what is secret and what is manifest, for wisdom, the fashioner of all things, taught me.

And then, of course, upstream from all this kind of thinking and the fountainhead of most of it, is the language of the Old Testament scriptures themselves, including the famous poem in Proverbs chapter eight, where personified wisdom says, I was there when he set the heavens in place, when he marked out the horizon on the face of the deep, when he established the clouds above and fixed securely the fountains of the deep, when he gave the sea its boundary so the waters would not overstep his command, when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was

constantly at his side, I was filled with delight day after day, rejoicing always in his presence, rejoicing in his whole world and delighting in mankind.

And Paul takes that whole tradition of speaking about the word and the wisdom of God manifested visibly in the world and holding that world together.

And he says, everything you can say about the word and wisdom of God the Creator, by which the world was made, everything you can say about the word of God, that he understands within himself for all eternity and that he speaks into visible form by giving order and beauty and structure to the world, that he speaks into existence.

Everything you can say about the wisdom and the word of God ultimately converges in the person of Jesus, the one in whom God makes his eternal word and wisdom known.

But that's not all.

Because the God who makes himself known in the Gospel is not only the God who created the world in the beginning, but also the God who raised Jesus from the dead, here on the earth in the middle of history, and whose purpose is to restore and reconcile the whole world through him.

Verse 18b, and this is now, if you like, the second stanza of the hymn, the poem that Paul is giving to us.

Verse 18b, he is the beginning and the first born from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy.

For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood shed on the cross.

So the God of the Gospel is not just the personal, private deity of Christians, but the creator of all things.



And his purpose as the Saviour is not simply, not merely to leave the world as it is, and rescue a few individuals out of it.

But to reconcile the whole world to himself.

And his plan is to do that through Jesus.

Through the blood of his cross.

Not through the power of brute force, but through the redemptive power of Jesus' death and resurrection.

That is how big the Gospel is.

And that is the story we became part of, when we heard about Jesus, and put our trust in him.

That is the hope held out to us in the Gospel, from which Paul says we must not move.

And so in the final verses of the passage, verses 21 to 23, Paul's readers in Colossi re-enter the narrative.

They've receded into the background in verses 15 to 20, but they're back in frame in verses 21 to 23.

And we by implication are back in frame with them.

Once, Paul says, you were alienated from God, like the rest of the whole fallen creation, like everyone.

Once you were alienated from God, enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour, but now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you wholly in his sight without blemish and free from accusation.

If you continue in your faith, established and firm, not moved from the hope held out in the Gospel, this is the Gospel that you heard.

And that has been proclaimed to every creature under heaven and of which I, Paul, have become a servant.

This is the Gospel that you heard.

The Gospel of the God who created the whole world, who holds it together in Christ, his word and his image, whose plan is to restore and to reconcile it to himself through Christ's death and resurrection.

That is the scope and the scale of the hope that the Gospel of the Lord Jesus holds out to us.

And we must not let go of it or forget it or reduce it to something smaller or less magnificent than it is.

Two reasons, as I close, two reasons among many others why we need a Gospel as big as that.

Both of them relating to the circumstances that motivated Paul to write this letter to the Colossians.

And both of them applying no less forcefully, no less relevantly to our own.

We need it first of all because of the powers, bigger than us, that exercise dominion within the world that we inhabit.

Paul, as we are reminded in the next paragraph of Colossians, Paul is writing this letter from prison, from house arrest, in all likelihood, in Rome, two years and counting into a long, uncertain period of incarceration under the authority of Rome, waiting for the outcome of the appeal that he has made to Caesar.

And he writes in full consciousness of the fact that the world we live in is structured and ordered in a way it should not be, ruled over by idolatrous, oppressive, unjust, exploitative empires, overshadowed and haunted by the dark, invisible spiritual powers that stand behind them, subverting the good order of God, tearing apart relationships, sowing seeds of hatred and conflict and greed and immorality within the hearts of men and women within God's world.

We inhabit this world not as autonomous free agents on a level playing field in full control of our circumstances and our destinies.

That is not what it is to be human in a fallen world.

And the gospel, Paul's big all-inclusive gospel, Paul's gospel fortifies us to live with confidence and with courage in a world like that.

In defiance of the powers that exploit and divide and destroy within the present darkness of this age, convinced that nothing in this world, things in heaven and things on earth, thrones, powers, rulers, authorities, nothing in this world has any existence that is ultimately independent of the God who made all things or of Christ through whom and for whom it was created.

And nothing in this world will be left unconquered and unreconciled by Christ's saving work.

So we can live in this world in confident allegiance to Jesus, swimming against the stream, shining as light in the darkness, not intimidated by or conforming to or cowered into silence by the powers that exercise dominion and under whose dominion we used to exist, but holding fast

instead to the hope of a new and reconciled world that is held out to us in the gospel and not shifting from that hope.

That's the first reason we need to hold on to the bigness of Paul's gospel, because of the powers that dominate the world in which we are called to live in obedience to the hope that we've been given.

The second reason we need to hold on to the bigness of Paul's gospel has to do with the wisdom that we have been called to walk in.

As we learn in the following chapter of the letter, Colossians is written partly as a warning to the readers against the specious wisdom of a false alternative rationality that is being promoted among them and at risk of becoming influential within the church and Colossi.

If we are working our way through a whole series on Colossians, we'd see that unfolding across the next few weeks.

If you read through the rest of the letter, you'll see it there in every chapter.

But for now, it's just worth noting, even here in chapter one, the way in which Paul continues to remind us that the fullness of the wisdom by which the world was made in the beginning, the wisdom that ordered the universe, is wrapped up in the word that God has spoken to us in Christ.

In him, verse 19, God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell.

In him, as Paul goes on to say in chapter two, verse three, are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.

If we live in Christ and we walk according to the wisdom that we are given in him, then we are cutting with the grain of the universe.

We are ordering our lives in accordance with the patterns and the goodness and the beauty and the truth of the one who made the world.

And we're giving our allegiance to the one for whom.

Everything was designed to work.

To reduce the gospel down to something less than that, to just the medicine we take from time to time for the forgiveness of our sins.

And to live by some other rationality as the wisdom that we walk by, the wisdom that shapes our daily lives Monday to Saturday, is to set up an incoherence that is ultimately unsustainable.

The gospel comes with its own wisdom embedded within it.

And it is held out to us by God not only as the medicine for our sins, but also as the message to shape our daily lives.

That is the gospel that we heard when we learned about Jesus and we put our trust in Him.

Let us pray that God would continue to enable us by the work of His Spirit to keep learning its length and breadth and height and depth, and living by its wisdom day by day.

Let's pray.

Father, we commit to you again this morning, our life together as your people here at Northern Life and the community at Mauling where I serve, in the daily lives that we live, seven days a week, in all the variety of places that you have put us in.

And we pray that every day we would live in confident allegiance to the one whom you have raised from the dead and seated at your right hand, in whom we are already raised and with whom we are already seated, as the ruler of all things, and the one for whom and through him all things exist.

Give us, we pray, a love for the Lord Jesus and a devotion to him that gives him our allegiance ahead of everything else.

And give us, we pray, the wisdom that is in him, so that we might walk by that wisdom, order our choices, our priorities, our commitments, the shape of our lives, by the wisdom of the gospel.

And so that we might make that wisdom manifest in the way we live it out day by day as the community of your people.

Order our lives, we pray, by the wisdom of the gospel, and make it visible in the way we live it out, so that Jesus, our Saviour, might be lifted up and glorified.

Keep us in this gospel, we pray, unmoved, not shifting from it, for Jesus' sake and for His glory.

Amen.