

Whitton Avenue Distinctives

Week 1: A Reformed Understanding of the Gospel

Introduction

The aim of this lesson is for our hearts to be gripped by the radical nature of the gospel. While our church's perspectives align more with a historic Reformed understanding than an Arminian view, the nature of our study is not to argue for one against the other or to delve into the finer details that have been contentious for centuries. The priority here is to allow the Bible's emphases to transform our life with God as individuals and as a church.

What is the gospel?

The Biblical story of the gospel has often been stated in terms of events: creation, fall, redemption, and new creation. This is a helpful way to understand the narrative of the Bible. We could also articulate this in terms of the characters involved: God and humans. More specifically, the story could be framed this way: God's glory, human sin, redemption through Jesus Christ.

Let's walk through this story beginning in Genesis then expanding to the entire Bible. As we do, one of the pressing questions is that of extremes. How great is the glory of God? How radical was the fall of humanity? To what lengths did God go to redeem his people?

1. God's glory

Text to read: Genesis 1:1-13

What do we learn about God in this passage?

- God exists before time began
- God created everything
- God has unlimited power—he speaks and substance comes into useful being
- God is good and everything he creates is good
- God creates an ordered world out of chaos
- God is transcendent over his creation, not bound to it
- God does all that he pleases
- God is the main character of the Biblical story

Text to read: Genesis 1:26-31

What do we learn about God in this passage?

- God exists as a plurality in relationship
- God has dominion over all his creation
- God provides for his creation

Text to read: Genesis 2:15-17

What do we learn about God in this passage?

- God provides abundantly for all our needs
- God has the authority to create rules in his world
- God is the center of man's moral universe
- God is the source of all life. To cut ties with God is to die.
- God demands perfect obedience. One breach of God's law receives full punishment.

Pause for a moment and ask yourself an honest question: Does all of this talk about God excite my heart or bore me? Does it all feel like setup to the main event with the central characters or am I already reading about the main event with the central character?

When we talk about a Reformed understanding of the gospel, the main emphasis of is not on finer, theological points such as the extent of the atonement or the nature of election. The main emphasis is on God:

- The centrality of God as the main character of the Biblical story
- The eternal existence of God as a community in loving, intimate relationship
- The power of God to speak non-existent things into existence
- The sovereign dominion of God over all of his creation
- The holiness of God in demanding moral perfection from his image bearers
- The judgment of God on disobedient humans
- The mercy of God in redeeming his people
- The faithfulness of God to all his promises

It would be difficult to list off every one of these attributes every time we talked about God, so there is a summary word the Bible gives to describe the weight, the beauty, the brilliant splendor of who God is: glory. The central priority of a Reformed understanding of the gospel is the glory of God. The glorious God is the sun at the center of the biblical universe. Everything revolves around him.

This "Copernican Revolution" that God is at the center of all things, not us, is absolutely essential for all the discussion that will follow. If we begin with ourselves as the center, then much of the Biblical story could strike us as unfair. We will emphasize the peripheral and marginalize the central. So we must begin with this core assumption: God is the center of the story. The Bible begins with the glorious God creating the universe and the Bible ends with the glorious God at the center of the new creation, giving light to all its inhabitants and receiving all worship and praise for his redeemed image bearers. Paul captures this radical orientation to God with one short, potent conclusion in his theological masterpiece: "For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory forever. Amen" (Romans 11:36).

2. Human sin

In light of the glory of God we see the horror of human sin which, at its heart, is to “[exchange] the glory of the immortal God for images” (Romans 1:23) and to “fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23).

The beginning of human sin takes place in the Garden of Eden. Everything changed for Adam and Eve when they ate of the forbidden fruit. At the end of Genesis 2, “the man and his wife were both naked and were not ashamed” (Genesis 2:25). But once they sinned against God, they turned on one another, hid themselves from one another, and hid from the presence of God. God cursed the ground, made their work of farming and childbearing toilsome and painful, and told them of the disharmony that would continue to plague their relationship (Genesis 3:1-19).

In short, God’s warning that “in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die” (Genesis 2:17) had horrific, pervasive effects at every relational level: with God, with one another, with how they viewed themselves, and with work in the creation. Sin brought death into the world.

The Old Testament primarily works out the understanding of how bad human sin is through narrative. Cain kills Abel out of his anger. God had warned him, “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is crouching at the door. Its desire is for you, but you must rule over it” (Genesis 4:7). Five generations later, Lamech kills a young man for a disrespectful slap and brazenly challenges God to punish him seventy times Cain’s punishment (Genesis 4:19-24).

After many more generations of this sinfulness in the line of Cain, things come to a head in the days of Noah with this damning assessment: “The LORD saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). Because of human sin, God judges the earth with a flood, rescuing only Noah and his family from the judgment. After the flood, God’s mandates to Noah and his family echo that given to Adam and Eve, suggesting that a new creation has begun, that people have a second chance to fulfill their God-given calling.

But in Genesis 11 we see the opposite happen. People consolidate around Babel—in explicit disobedience to God’s call to “fill the earth”—and they build a tower to reach heaven in order to “make a name for ourselves” (Genesis 11:4). By the end of Genesis 11, there is a sense that if God does not intervene, there is no hope for sinful humanity.

The Bible talks about this sinful state of humanity in very stark terms. In Romans 3, Paul compiles a litany of Old Testament texts to show that “all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written:

“None is righteous, no, not one;

no one understands; no one seeks for God.

All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

“Their throat is an open grave; they use their tongues to deceive.”

“The venom of asps is under their lips.”

“Their mouth is full of curses and bitterness.”

“Their feet are swift to shed blood;
in their paths are ruin and misery,
and the way of peace they have not known.”

“There is no fear of God before their eyes” (Romans 3:9–18).

This is Paul’s way of communicating the radical effect of the fall on humanity. Left to our own devices, apart from the intervention of God, this is the state of sinners.

In the book of Ephesians, Paul describes this state in terms of spiritual death. “And you were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience—among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind” (Ephesians 2:1–3).

Reformed theologians describe this state as “total depravity” or “radical corruption.” The teaching is not that humans constantly act as wickedly as possible but that we are spiritually incapable of practicing righteousness. “For the mindset of the flesh is hostile to God, for it does not submit to God’s law; indeed, it cannot. Those who are in the flesh cannot please God” (Romans 8:7–8).

Not only does total depravity mean that we cannot please God or do righteousness, it also means that we cannot even enter into a relationship with God by our own power. As Jesus told Nicodemus, “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (John 3:5).

Just as we must pause to feel the beautiful weight of the glory of God, we also must pause to feel the tragic weight of human sin. Because sin is the atmosphere into which we are born—the water in which the fish swim—it can be difficult for us to comprehend its horrific, perverted, abnormal reality. This is displayed not only in behavior we might consider deviant but in the normal, daily ways we function—living with ourselves and our interests as the center of our world rather than the glory of God our center and love for God our highest ethic. In his catalog of human sin, Paul lists gossip, foolishness, and disobedience to parents alongside murder, ruthlessness, and hatred of God. It is all sin and it all brings on the wrath of God (Romans 1:18, 28–31). As we saw with the the storyline from Adam and Eve’s fall to the Tower of Babel (Genesis 3–11), unless God intervenes, humans will be lost eternally in their sinful state.

3. Redemption through Jesus Christ

In Ephesians 2 we saw the radical nature of the fallen, sinful state. The verse where we left off tells of the wrath of God coming on our sin. It is important for us to realize that this could be the end of the story. God would be just and righteous to bring wrath and eternal damnation on every one of his sinful, disobedient image-bearers. This is the black backdrop against which the precious diamond of the gospel is displayed. If we do not come to terms with the deserved eternal punishment of every sinner by our holy God, we will never come to terms with how good the good news of Jesus is.

This good news is expressed in Ephesians 2 with the next words: "But God, being rich in mercy..." (Ephesians 2:4). Without God's merciful intervention, nothing good would have ever come to humanity. And this merciful intervention was expressed from the very beginning of human sin, embedded in the very word of judgment God spoke to Adam and Eve. In Genesis 3:15, after cursing the serpent, God tells him, "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Genesis 3:15). This "first gospel" is a word of hope, a promise from God that he will reverse the curse and undo the disastrous effects of Adam's sin.

This hope echoed throughout the generations, expressed by Noah's father who said of his son, "Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands" (Genesis 5:29). While Noah did not prove to be the promised savior, he was evidence of God's merciful salvation when he "found favor in the eyes of the LORD" and was saved in the ark through the flood of judgment (Genesis 6:8).

God's merciful intervention breaks into the tragic narrative of Genesis 3-11 with his uninvited, unprompted appearance to Abram with promises of great blessing in Genesis 12: "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed" (Genesis 12:1-3).

These promises set up the story of God's people, Israel, through whom he would bring blessing to all nations. The abrupt and unmerited nature of God's covenant promises to Abraham cannot be overemphasized. According to Joshua 24:2, Abram's family "served other gods" before God appeared to Abraham. And why, of all the people that God could have brought about his promised redemption, did he choose Abram? The logic of God's choice is spelled out in Deuteronomy 7:6-8, when Abraham's descendants who had been rescued from slavery in Egypt were on the verge of entering the land promised to their forefather more than 400 years earlier:

"The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in

number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

One aspect of God’s glory is his independence, his freedom to choose to show mercy as he desires. When he put his glory on display before Moses, he declared, “I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy” (Exodus 33:19). And here in Deuteronomy, the logic of why God “set his love on you and chose you” is “because the LORD loves you.” Merciful intervention is God’s sovereign prerogative, and it is by that gracious will alone that anyone is rescued from eternal wrath.

This theme of God’s sovereign and gracious choice to set his love on particular sinners is central to the Reformed understanding of how God glorifies himself in the gospel. Apart from God’s electing love, no one would seek after him to be saved. The great mystery of God’s election is why he would choose to redeem anyone, much less an entire nation and, through that nation, people from all the families of the earth.

This merciful intervention came to its ultimate expression in Jesus Christ, God incarnate. The angel who told Joseph that Mary’s child was from the Holy Spirit explained the reason for this child’s name: “you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21). Jesus was the promised seed of the woman who would reverse the curse and undo all the horrific effects of the fall. His saving power was on display through his mighty, authoritative deeds of healing the sick, raising the dead, and casting out demons. Yet the ultimate salvation he would bring about was through his own death and resurrection, whereby he would “save his people from their sins.”

Jesus’ ministry was marked both by open invitation and by particular redemptive action. “Come to me,” Jesus invited, “all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). His core proclamation—“the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel” (Mark 1:15)—was offered to all. At the same time, to the disciples who responded to his call he said “You did not choose me, but I chose you” (John 15:16) and, in his prayer for them to his Father, he referred to his followers as “the people whom you gave me out of the world” (John 17:6). In the same sermon Jesus could announce “whoever believes has eternal life” (John 6:47) and “No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him” (John 6:44).

We see in this a pattern that there are two realities present in the preaching of the gospel: the call of humans and the call of God. The call of humans is the preaching of Christ’s death and resurrection for sinners, holding out the free gift of forgiveness of sins and eternal life to anyone who would repent and believe in Christ. At the same time as this, God works through that human call to save some through his divine call. Reformed theologians have referred to God’s call as “effectual calling” or “irresistible grace.”

For instance, when Paul was in Corinth, “he reasoned in the synagogue every Sabbath, and tried to persuade Jews and Greeks” (Acts 18:4). But when he wrote the Corinthian believers, he recognized what God did through his message: “we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1 Corinthians 1:23–24).

Likewise, when Paul went to Thessalonica, “on three Sabbath days he reasoned with them from the Scriptures, explaining and proving that it was necessary for the Christ to suffer and to rise from the dead, and saying, “This Jesus, whom I proclaim to you, is the Christ”” (Acts 17:2–3). The text goes on to say that some were persuaded by Paul and some were jealous and drove him out of the city. When he later wrote the Thessalonian believers, he said, “For we know, brothers loved by God, that he has chosen you, because our gospel came to you not only in word, but also in power and in the Holy Spirit and with full conviction” (1 Thessalonians 1:4–5). Paul preached to all and God called some.

God’s work of calling sinners to himself is specifically carried out by the Holy Spirit. Just as the Spirit was involved in the creation of the world through the word (Genesis 1:1-3), the Spirit is the one that brings about new life in God’s elect through the preaching of the gospel word about Christ. As we saw earlier, Jesus said that those who would enter God’s kingdom must be born of the flesh and of the Spirit (John 3:8). Paul captures this in his second letter to the Thessalonians: “But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the firstfruits to be saved, through sanctification by the Spirit and belief in the truth. To this he called you through our gospel, so that you may obtain the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thessalonians 2:13–14).

Practical Implications

1. Worship

As stated at the beginning the central reality of the Bible is the glory of God. The ultimate purpose not only of God’s work of creation but also his work of redemption is his glory. We have seen this articulated in Romans 11:36 (“To him be glory forever”). Paul reiterates this even more emphatically in Ephesians 1, where the description of God’s merciful initiative in saving his people—blessing, choosing, predestining, adopting, redeeming, and giving an inheritance to them—is punctuated with doxology: “to the praise of his glorious grace...to the praise of his glory...to the praise of his glory” (Ephesians 1:6, 12, 14). In the next chapter Paul says that God’s work of making us alive with Christ, raising us up with him, and seating us in the heavenly places with him is “so that in the coming ages he might show the immeasurable riches of his grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 2:7). Salvation is for our good and for God’s glory.

This eternal song of worship for God’s work of saving us is recorded in John’s Revelation: “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,

and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth" (Revelation 5:9–10).

2. Humility

God saves us in such a way that gives all glory to him and none to us. Immediately following one of his most important descriptions of justification by grace through faith, Paul asks "Then what becomes of our boasting? It is excluded" (Romans 3:27). Similarly, in Ephesians 2 the emphasis on salvation "by grace through faith" is that our redemption in Christ "is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast" (Ephesians 2:8–9). Paul commands Gentile believers, in light of Israelite disobedience, "do not become proud, but fear [or stand in awe]" (Romans 11:20). When he writes to the boastful Corinthians about their being called by God, he reminds them that "God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. And because of him you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption, so that, as it is written, 'Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord'" (1 Corinthians 1:28–31). Later he asks them an incisive question to cut down their boasting: "What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?" (1 Corinthians 4:7)

When we find pride in our hearts, we must go back to the truths of the gospel: God's glory, our sin, and redemption in Christ. When we meditate on God's intractable holiness, our spiritual inability to do anything righteous, and the Spirit's work to bring us spiritual life through the preaching about Christ, it lays our pride low and develops gratitude to God for all his spiritual blessings.

3. Prayer

A robust belief in the sovereignty of God produces prayers like that of the early, persecuted church in Acts 4:

"...truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place. And now, Lord, look upon their threats and grant to your servants to continue to speak your word with all boldness, while you stretch out your hand to heal, and signs and wonders are performed through the name of your holy servant Jesus." (Acts 4:27–30)

If we truly believe that only God can make a spiritually dead heart live through the preaching of the gospel, then we will pray both for boldness in our gospel proclamation and for God to call sinners to himself.

4. Evangelism

Romans 9, in which Paul develops the most detailed and explicit theology of election, also begins with Paul's most intense expression of his evangelistic zeal: "I have great sorrow and unceasing anguish in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed and cut off from Christ for the sake of my brothers, my kinsmen according to the flesh" (Romans 9:2–3). 1 Corinthians, which opens with very strong teaching about God's effectual calling, also contains Paul's evangelistic motto: "I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings" (1 Corinthians 9:22–23).

For Paul, God's election of sinners did not hamper his evangelistic zeal but stoked it. Because God worked through the means of human preaching, Paul could passionately, urgently, persuasively proclaim Jesus Christ and him crucified, trusting that God would use that to call sinners to himself. This removed any pride from Paul's ministry, because the work of bringing about spiritual transformation was God's work, not Paul's. So when the Corinthians started choosing favorite apostles, Paul reminded them, "What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Corinthians 3:5–7).

This truth of God's effectual call through our gospel preaching not only removes pride but can also remove fear. Our job is not to make someone believe in Christ for salvation—that is God's job. Our job is to faithfully communicate the news of Christ's death and resurrection and to call sinners to repent and place their trust in Christ's work on their behalf. This is not to say that we do this dispassionately or unenthusiastically. Paul was arduous in his gospel proclamation. He recounted to the Ephesians how "for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears" (Acts 20:31). We should likewise give whole-hearted pleas for repentance and belief in our preaching. But we can lay down at night and rest in God's sovereign work to save his people through the preaching of his word.

Appendix

What is meant by “Reformed”?

In the broad scope of church history, the Reformed tradition is that part of the Protestant Reformation that followed the teaching of John Calvin. Yet Calvin did not teach anything new but sought to bring the church back to her beliefs stated in the ancient creeds and the teaching of theologians like Augustine (354-430) and Anselm (1033-1109).

During the Protestant Reformation, 5 statements were made to distinguish the theology of Luther, Calvin, and the other reformers from that of the Roman Catholic church:

Protestant

Scripture alone
Faith alone
Grace alone
Christ alone
Glory to God alone

Roman Catholic

Scripture and tradition
Faith and works
Grace and merits
Christ, Mary, and intercession of saints
God, saints, and church hierarchy¹

About 50 years after Calvin’s death, a gathering was held in the Netherlands to debate 5 major points where Jacob Arminius, a theology professor in the Reformed tradition, differed from Calvin’s teaching. This led to the formation of the TULIP, which shows where these groups disagreed.

Calvinist/Reformed

Total Depravity
Unconditional election
Limited (or definite) atonement
Irresistible grace
Perseverance of the saints

Arminian

Partial depravity, remaining free will
Conditional election based on foreknowledge
Universal atonement
Resistible grace
Potential loss of salvation

Generally speaking, the Arminian theology, or some form of it, was taken up over the following centuries by the Wesleyan tradition (Nazarene, Salvation Army, Methodist), Free Will Baptist, Church of Christ, Pentecostal, and Anabaptist groups. Calvinist theology is generally held by Presbyterian, Reformed, Anglican, and some Baptist groups.

This history is introduced simply to identify the context in which differing understandings of salvation have taken place over the last 2,000 years and especially the last 500 years. Our church does not come from a tradition bound by particular confessions, yet we acknowledge the helpfulness of Reformed confessions such as the Belgic Confession of Faith (1561), the Heidelberg Catechism (1563), the Canons of Dort (1618), the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647), and the 1689 London Confession.

¹ From *Living for God’s Glory: an Introduction to Calvinism* by Joel R. Beeke, p. 5.