

# Sermon 76, The Gospel Climax of Acts, Acts 26:23

**Proposition:** The climax of Luke's narrative is a perfect summary of the gospel.

- I. The Precondition of the Gospel
- II. The Content of the Gospel
  - A. God's Anointed One Suffered Death
  - B. God's Anointed One Reigns as King
    1. His Resurrection
    2. The Resurrection of those in Him
- III. The Proclamation of the Gospel
  - A. God's Anointed One Is the Ultimate Prophet
  - B. God's Anointed One Is the Light of the World
- IV. The Universality of the Gospel
  - A. It Is for Jews
  - B. It Is for Gentiles Also

## Introduction

Dearly beloved congregation of our Lord Jesus Christ, as many of you know, my other job is to be an English teacher. One of the things we talk about in English class is the plot climax, where everything comes to a head; after that point, we have the falling action, the wrap-up of all the loose ends from the plot. What, I ask you, is the climax of the book of Acts? The answer, as you have already surmised, is that it's right here in front of you. If you were to pick a moment in which the issues crystallize, in which our hero confronts and vanquishes the biggest challenge in front of him, the moment after which all the rest is just tying up loose ends, I'd say that it's this moment. Paul's biggest challenge is to faithfully proclaim Jesus in the face of strong opposition. That is exactly what he does here in Acts 23 — indeed, he does it very well, such that I'd say this verse stands as the moment where we can see the clearest possible gospel proclamation in front of a governor and a king. So let's dive into this verse and see what Paul says about the gospel to Festus and Agrippa.

### I. The Precondition of the Gospel

He begins by describing the precondition of the gospel: that the Christ *was able to suffer*. Earlier we saw Luke 24:26, where Jesus asks the disciples on the Emmaus Road, "Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" The Anointed's suffering is necessary, but before that, it is possible. God's anointed has entered space and time with the ability to undergo suffering and death. That is not what we would have expected. But it is what God did.

What sort of necessity does the gospel have? Why does Jesus, and Luke after Him, insist that it is necessary? The answer is clear: The gospel is necessary with a divine necessity. God set it up so that it had to be this way. The necessity of the gospel is not a necessity that compels God

— a necessity of His nature. Rather, the necessity of the gospel is a necessity that God freely chose — a necessity of His decree. Given His decision to save the human race, the only way that He could carry out that decision was through the suffering of His Son.

We were so wicked that we deserved the death penalty. Only God's Anointed Son could suffer the penalty that so many millions deserved, and suffer it all at once. That's why the gospel was necessary. The suffering of Jesus was necessary because it was the only way to save sinners and simultaneously save the justice of God.

In other words, this proclamation that the Christ must suffer includes in itself the bad news that we are sinners. It is the part that is generally left out by those who don't want to tell people they are sinners, or, as Jesus put in the verse we looked at last Sunday, that they are under Satan's power.

The good news of salvation is necessary only for sinners, not for righteous people. The death of Christ is good news only for those who deserved to die, but had Him die in their place.

## **II. The Content of the Gospel**

But Paul quickly proceeds from the necessity of Christ's sufferings to a double-pronged proclamation of the gospel. How did he declare the good news?

### **A. God's Anointed One Suffered Death**

The first prong of the declaration is that God's Anointed One, His Christ, suffered death. That is included in the word "suffer." Not only was His suffering necessary; His suffering the ultimate penalty was actually necessary as well. The gospel begins with the news that Christ died according to the Scriptures. We rightly criticize Jesuit Matteo Ricci, who taught Christianity in the court of the Emperor of China for a decade but never mentioned the death of Christ. He said the people were not ready for it. But the fact of the matter is that a gospel without the death of Christ is not the gospel of the New Testament. Paul was not afraid to say that he served a Messiah who had been crucified.

### **B. God's Anointed One Reigns as King**

But the second step, and just as crucial, is the exaltation of the Messiah. Humiliation comes first, but one cannot leave out the rest of the gospel. A gospel only of humiliation and death is so radically incomplete as to be totally incorrect. The good news is not that Jesus died, full stop. It is that He died *and rose again*.

#### **1. His Resurrection**

Because of His resurrection, He is King. The human being who can beat death is the one worthy to reign over us all. That should be obvious. In any contest for leadership, any war between rival factions of humanity, the side that can't be permanently killed is going to win. The leader who has overcome our worst enemy is the leader who ought to be in the supreme place of honor. And that leader's name is Jesus of Nazareth; He is also God's Anointed Son. And therefore, He reigns. The firstborn from the dead is the ruler over the kings of the earth.

#### **2. The Resurrection of those in Him**

The firstborn from the dead is also one who is going to bring back to life everyone in Him. That is, all those mystically united to Christ by faith are going to rise from the dead. It's not a matter

of if; it's a matter of when. The Christ is the first to rise, but He is not the last. What of all the people who were raised before Him? The answer to this question is that they were not raised finally and fully, to a glorified state in which death could no longer touch them. They were simply restored to a pre-death existence; they would die again. Lazarus is dead again; so is the son of the widow of Nain, and the man whose bones touched Elisha's. But when Jesus rose from the dead, Death perished. Jesus rose permanently glorified, lit from within by the light of Heaven itself. In fact, I should say, He simply let the light of Heaven which was Himself shine through. It had been there the whole time. But instead of a mortal man, He rose an immortal man. And that resurrection is coming for everyone who believes in Jesus. That resurrection is coming for you. You will no longer be a man of dust; you will be like the Lord from Heaven.

Paul couldn't resist proclaiming, in other words, that in Jesus had begun a process of the reversal of the curse and the elimination of death. The whole cosmos is being brought back under the Father's control through the conquering work of the Son. The curse will be no more; suffering, death, mortality will be gone. Do you want to rise from the dead? Do you want to see the regenerated world? The far green country under a swift sunrise evoked by Tolkien when Frodo stepped off the boat into Heaven? Then put your faith in Jesus.

### **III. The Proclamation of the Gospel**

But Jesus didn't just rise from the dead.

#### **A. God's Anointed One Is the Ultimate Prophet**

He became the ultimate prophet. Acts has been about the servants proclaiming the master. But now, at the climax, Luke reveals that Peter, Paul, etc. are not the greatest of the prophets. That would be Jesus. Though Luke has drawn all his main characters on the model of the rejected prophet, here it comes to the fore: Jesus Himself is the ultimate prophet, the ultimate proclaimer of light.

And that, my friends, brings us full circle. Jesus proclaimed Himself to Paul on the Damascus Road and sent Paul out to proclaim Him. Now, Paul proclaims that Jesus Himself is the ultimate proclaimer. As the Lord said, "it is the Spirit of your Father speaking in you." Jesus speaks through instruments like Paul and Peter. The great prophet gives words to the little prophets. The Christ saves and sanctifies the Christians.

Do you know Jesus as the great prophet to teach you? The one who proclaims the pure, unadulterated word of God to you? Do you look for a preacher from whom you can hear the words of Christ?

#### **B. God's Anointed One Is the Light of the World**

But as a prophet, what does Jesus preach? Paul boils it down to one word: Light. Jesus proclaims light. He stands against darkness. He overcomes it. He proclaims, ultimately, that He is the light of the world, and that whoever follows him will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.

God is light. Jesus is light.

Darkness is an obvious code for evil. To say that there is no darkness at all in God is to say in other words that there is no evil at all within Him. We say of certain TV shows and films

that they are “very dark.” By that we mean that evil runs rampant in them, and perhaps even triumphs at the end. But evil does not run rampant in Him! He is entirely light.

Some commentators begin by calling this light God’s holiness. But I don’t think that’s quite right. As we have talked about before, holiness does not in the first instance mean “moral purity” or even “moral perfection.” Holiness means existing for the special purpose of glorifying and enjoying God. To be holy is to have your existence oriented toward God. Now, there’s no doubt that God is holy. But to say that He is light highlights not so much His existence for Himself as His total and complete moral perfection. He is perfectly righteous. He is perfectly good. He does not have a dark side. He does not have the capacity to join the dark side, or to go dark, or to quench or dim His light. His radiance is absolute; there is not one little tiny particle of sin, wrongdoing, or evil anywhere inside Him, nor any capacity for such to enter Him.

Brothers and sisters, we all know what it’s like to have internal darkness. There are attitudes, habits, and desires in our hearts that we’d rather not think about! Recently, as some of you probably heard, there was an outcry from fans of the hit (and very dark and evil) TV show *Game of Thrones* when a beloved character “went dark” at the end. The outcry was that the ending was unsatisfying — but not that it was unrealistic! No. We humans know ourselves well enough to know that a beloved character doing something shockingly evil is only too plausible, even if hurts like Hell in a very strong sense.

But though you and I know what internal darkness feels like, *God does not*. Jesus says in John’s Gospel, “The prince of this world is coming, *and he has nothing in me.*” There was no point of contact for Satan within the heart of Jesus Christ. There was nothing about evil that appealed to Christ.

I was looking at an LED chip on Amazon recently. This little tiny piece cost about \$10 but had the power of a stadium light. The reviewers spoke of floodlighting fields with it, and warned not to stare into it directly because your eyes would never recover. Brothers and sisters, that is what God is like. You are more likely to find a shadow, a dark spot, on the surface of that little light-emitting diode than you are to find one anywhere in God. He is morally perfect. He cannot be tempted with evil. He cannot sin. He can’t want to sin. He has no attraction for sin, no willingness to sin, no friendliness for sin, anywhere within Himself.

Is that the God you know and worship? Is your God light, with no darkness in Him at all? That is the God that Jesus proclaimed. This message about God being light is the message that John heard from Jesus Himself. And so think about whether your God is morally pure like this. God’s pure light lays bare whatever is around Him. In the Son and Spirit, this a good thing, a blessing beyond all comparison. In the abstract, too, we rejoice that God dwells in the light, that Heaven is not the seat of the Kingdom of Darkness but rather the capital city of the Kingdom of Light! But brothers and sisters, what this means is that God’s light can and will expose you the moment you get close to Him. In the dark, no one can see your blemishes. No one can see your imperfections. And you and I like it that way. I’ve mentioned many times before that fancy restaurants are very dim inside. Why? Because people look better in the dark! Soft lighting does good things for hair and makeup, makes the blemishes harder to see, and generally casts a

romantic glow over everything. Direct sunlight in the New Mexico desert on a July afternoon doesn't do any favors for anyone's skin or laugh lines. And if this is true in the physical realm, how much more true is it in the moral realm? I have plenty of sins that I'd rather keep out of the limelight, away from public view, in a dark storage unit somewhere in the back alleys, in what Yeats called "the rag and bone shop of the heart." And I know you do too. We love keeping these rag and bone shops out of sight, curtains drawn, lights off. That ultra-bright LED chip would not be welcome in such a place. But brothers and sisters, you can't shut down or keep out the light of God. When He comes close to you, His light exposes everything that you are.

It does so not just for you, but ultimately for the whole world. Jesus brings the light of God to earth.

#### **IV. The Universality of the Gospel**

Paul highlights the light-of-the-world nature of Jesus by describing the universality of the gospel. It is not just a message for a certain group of people or a certain geographic region.

##### **A. It Is for Jews**

God's light is for Jews — people like Paul, and Agrippa and Bernice. The good news may be hidden from the minds of most Jews right now, as Paul acknowledges in 2 Corinthians. But the light is there whenever they open their minds and let it in.

##### **B. It Is for Gentiles Also**

This universal gospel is for Gentiles too. That means it is for people like you and me, here in Gillette, Wyoming. This too was one of the dark places of the earth. Listen to Joseph Conrad as he meditates on the light of the world from a secular perspective, speaking of the River Thames:

Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth!... The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

The sun set; the dusk fell on the stream, and lights began to appear along the shore. The Chapman light-house, a three-legged thing erect on a mud-flat, shone strongly. Lights of ships moved in the fairway—a great stir of lights going up and going down. And farther west on the upper reaches the place of the monstrous town was still marked ominously on the sky, a brooding gloom in sunshine, a lurid glare under the stars.

"And this also," said Marlow suddenly, "has been one of the dark places of the earth."

But the light of the world shines here, as it does in London — not the light of "civilization," but the light of Christ! So seek it. He had to suffer. He had to die. He had to rise — and in rising, He has conquered darkness forever. That's the message Paul proclaimed that day in Caesarea to a king and governor who wondered at what they were hearing. That's the message I proclaim to you this morning. And that's the message we will celebrate and sing for all eternity: King of kings! And Lord of lords! Forever! And ever! Hallelujah! Amen.