

Anne Witton - Wholehearted from the start

Intro

As Paul mentioned - Anne, SL Newcastle. Great to be here.

Wonderful to see how Roger's life was transformed by the gospel and the work of Agapé and then how over the years, God used Roger to bring the good news of Jesus to others. Many of us here have had our lives transformed by the love and grace of God and this conference is all about celebrating what God has done over the last 50 years and giving him the glory.

The gospel of Jesus is central to everything we do and is life-changing news to those who aren't yet Christians. It's also something that we as Christians need to take up and hold fast to every day.

So this talk is centred on God's wholehearted love for us and our wholehearted response.

CLICK (1) God's wholehearted love for us

The whole Bible is the gospel

When I found out I was being asked to speak on the gospel, I wasn't sure where to start.

The Gospel is all about Jesus and Jesus is found all through Scripture. From Creation to New Creation. It's tempting to think of the OT as pre-Jesus and that he first pops up in the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. But at the start of John he makes clear that Jesus was there in the beginning.

The whole Bible is full of the gospel - God's heart of love for people, his desire for relationship with us and his willingness to pay the ultimate price to bring us forgiveness, healing and restoration.

The whole Bible is the gospel story! **CLICK** [Gospel DNA - example of Paul. It's also Agapé's DNA wherever you slice it - encounter God's unconditional love]

With that in mind, we're going to drop in on a moment in Israelite history and look at what that tells us about God's heart for his people.

The Israelites and the Bronze snake

We'll be looking at a passage in the book of Numbers. I was a bit wary of Numbers at first as I thought it was all about maths! Ancient Jews knew the book as 'in the wilderness' which is a much more descriptive title.

Picks up the story of the people of Israel after they've been rescued from slavery in Egypt.

CLICK

People had been organised, priests set apart to serve God, law had been given (Sinai on map) and the place of worship had been constructed.

Guided by God towards the promised land.

CLICK Numbers 21: 4 - 9

4 They travelled from Mount Hor along the route to the Red Sea, to go around Edom. But the people grew impatient on the way; 5 they spoke against God and against Moses, and said, "Why have you brought us up out of Egypt to die in the wilderness? There is no bread! There is no water! And we detest this miserable food!"

6 Then the Lord sent venomous snakes among them; they bit the people and many Israelites died. **[CLICK]** 7 The people came to Moses and said, "We sinned when we spoke against the Lord and against you. Pray that the Lord will take the snakes away from us." So Moses prayed for the people.

8 The Lord said to Moses, "Make a snake and put it up on a pole; anyone who is bitten can look at it and live." 9 So Moses made a bronze snake and put it up on a pole. Then when anyone was bitten by a snake and looked at the bronze snake, they lived.

I must admit, when I first heard this as a new Christian it struck me as a weird story. I looked round the church and all the mature Christians were nodding wisely and I was thinking 'Why don't they find this odd?'.
So what's going on here and how is it relevant to us?

People are quick to forget God's amazing rescue and complain about the food God has provided, so God sends his judgement in the form of poisonous snakes. At first God's reaction seems quite extreme. **[If you were in a restaurant and you complained about the food, you'd think it was an overreaction if the manager brought out a poisoner's snake to bite you!]**

Israel's complaint is symptomatic of their heart towards God. Describing the food that God has provided as 'worthless'. They're turning their back on the God who has steadfastly loved them, forgiven them and just rescued them from horrific slavery in Egypt.

God brings judgement on them - serious consequences of rejecting him and his provision.

The wonderful thing is that God doesn't leave the Israelites to face the justifiable judgement for their repeated rebellion against him. He provides a means of salvation through looking at the bronze snake that Moses is instructed to put up on a pole.

Response needed - look at the snake. The people have to turn back to God and trust him.

John 3: 14 - 16

Jesus himself picks up this story in NT.

John 3: 16 is probably the most famous verses in the Bible, and is a wonderful summary of the gospel:

[CLICK] 16 For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

But how many people know what comes directly before it?

Context - Nicodemus has come to see Jesus in the night.

Nicodemus was a Pharisee - Jewish, a religious leader - so he would have known his OT.

[CLICK] John 3:14 - 15

14 Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the wilderness, so the Son of Man must be lifted up, 15 that everyone who believes may have eternal life in him.”

Jesus himself shows us the gospel relevance of the snake story. The OT stories are all shadows pointing forwards to God’s ultimate salvation plan for all human beings - the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. People who are dying in their sin find their salvation through the death of Jesus, suspended high on a cross.

He takes the punishment that we all deserve for rebelling against God and his resurrection is the ultimate triumph of life over death. All who will believe and trust in him are rescued from the death that is a result of rebellion, just as the Israelites were rescued from the deadly snake venom.

So what do these stories reveal about God’s wholehearted love for us?

Gospel omnibus

[CLICK] [In my spare time - transport museums. Old buses - omnibus. ‘Omnibus’ - Latin meaning ‘for all’.]

For all people, for all time

[CLICK] (1) All people were created for a relationship with God. God didn’t need to make us, but he chose to create us for his glory and for intimate relationship with him.

[CLICK] (2) All have sinned - rebelled against God.

[CLICK] Ketchup advert for a ‘non-sinful’ tomato sauce because it doesn’t have as much sugar in it. Our culture, sin = naughty but nice.

Sin isn’t a naughty little indulgence like having an extra cream bun. Nor is it an honest mistake. Hard-hearted rebellion against God.

[CLICK] “Sin is not a mistake. A mistake is taking the wrong exit on the highway. A sin is treason against a Holy God.” Rosaria Champagne Butterfield, *The Secret Thoughts of an Unlikely Convert*

[CLICK] (3) All are under judgement

What we do matters. There are serious consequences for rejecting the loving and holy God that we were created to worship. It matters when we are self-obsessed. It matters when we mistreat others for our own gain. It matters when we lie, gloat, boast or resent others. Our sin leads to pain, hatred and broken relationships. Most importantly, our sin leads to us being cut off from relationship with the one who made us and loves us, and ultimately leads to death.

[CLICK] (4) All who put their trust in Jesus will be saved

Jesus ultimately satisfies God's demand for holiness in his people, once and for all. He lived a life of wholehearted obedience to God and yet paid the penalty for our rebellion.

[CLICK] “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.”

1 John 3:16 NIV

The depth of God’s mercy and grace is profound. We deserve death, we’re headed for death, there’s nothing we can do about it and yet God chooses to save us rather than condemn us.

Gospel literally means ‘good news’. World’s biggest understatement. This is the best possible news anyone could hear!

The gospel is good news for everyone - rich and poor, young and old, Jew, Gentile, Muslim and atheist. For those who think they’re good and those who know they’re bad. For firemen and

prostitutes. For the nice lady that bakes cakes for the vicarage garden party and her alcoholic, wife-beating neighbour. The gospel is for all.

The whole Bible is God's love letter to us. There's history, poetry, law, wisdom literature, parable and some quite frankly terrifying apocalyptic writing. From start to finish it's a treasure trove and through it we know God's heart - that he created and loves every single one of us and longs to have a deep, everlasting relationship with us.

That's God's wholehearted love for us. So what about our wholehearted response?

[CLICK] (2) Our wholehearted response

(a) **[CLICK]** *Wholeheartedly accept the gospel*

Not enough to just know this - we have to respond. Stark contrast between those who believe and trust in Jesus and those who don't. Like the snake episode, it's a matter of life and death. What did the people need to do to live? Look at the snake that God had provided. It was God's provision and God's mercy that brought them life, not anything they'd accomplished themselves.

It also wasn't their status as Israelites that saves them.

Used to think I was a Christian because I'm British and went to church and I tried to be good. But when I was at uni, through reading the Bible I realised that that doesn't make me right with God. In fact, nothing I could do could mend the rift.

Human effort simply isn't enough to get you there. It's like trying to run across the USA non-stop (2,600 - 3,200 miles). Some will get further than others but all will fail, despite what the film Forrest Gump might suggest. In 2005, Dean Karnazes ran 350 miles across Northern California without stopping. Impressive, but that's only one state!

It is only God, through Christ's death and resurrection, who can rescue us from our life of disobedience, separation from God and death.

[CLICK] "God deliberately designed the gospel in such a way so as to strip me of pride and leave me without any grounds for boasting in myself whatsoever." (Milton Vincent, P. 21)

As we go on as Christians, we sometimes forget our desperate state without Jesus and start thinking we're quite good, esp when compared with other people. We need to remember that it's God who saves us and God who transforms our lives through his spirit. We've never got cause to pat ourselves on the back.

Christians aren't better than anyone else. In fact, we're just people who've realised how bad we are and have run to Jesus to save us.

The gift of salvation is there for anyone who wants to accept it.

[CLICK] 40th birthday. John's present. Analogy of a gift that you have to receive and unwrap. Can't enjoy it or experience the value of it otherwise.

We need to believe and trust in Jesus. A helpful biblical word is repentance - literally turning our hearts and lives to face a completely new direction.

Accepting Christ as our Lord and Saviour comes with a cost - it means dying to ourselves and giving him everything. [Night in Jan 1996 when I gave my life to Christ, I knew some of what it would mean for me. Grew up being exclusively attracted to women - life of singleness and celibacy. Entrust God with my hopes and dreams and he's given me a 'life to the full' that I

could never have dared imagine! For some, becoming a Christian means being in physical danger or being rejected by family or friends. Cost is the same for all of us - everything.]

[Pottery example - new creation]

But the gift of new life in Christ is worth it! We are freed from the penalty and the power of sin. We have the freedom to live life as it was meant to be. To enjoy our relationship with God free from shame and guilt. To love others, live generously and forgive wholeheartedly.

When we surrender ourselves to God he will fill us with his spirit so that we can love him, sacrificially serve others, be transformed into the likeness of Christ and have a sure and certain hope.

(b) **[CLICK] Wholeheartedly live the gospel**

The gospel isn't just the way into God's kingdom. It's the heartbeat of the kingdom. We're in big trouble if we forget for a single second how utterly dependent we are on God's grace, not just for our salvation but for daily living.

There are many people in this room who have been wholeheartedly following Christ for years - talk to them. There are people who have done some extraordinary things - who have pioneered global movements, who have put their own lives in danger to share the gospel and have paid a huge cost to follow Jesus. They'll tell you that this was possible, not because of any greatness of their own, but because of Jesus and God's grace at work in their lives.

The gospel is a great leveller isn't it? The truth is, we're all ordinary people loved by an extraordinary God. Whether we're a missionary in Russia, building wells in Uganda, working in an office in Berlin or sweeping the streets in Rio, God's call to all of us is to live wholeheartedly for him, wherever he places us.

If that's whetted your appetite, there'll be more on living in response to the Gospel in Dela's talk on Sunday morning.

(c) **[CLICK] Wholeheartedly share the gospel**

This whole weekend's a celebration of Agapé being on mission for 50 years and we'll be looking in more detail about what it means to be people on mission in our culture and world in the next sessions.

I find that sharing my faith is much easier when I remember how amazing the gospel is!

When we remind ourselves of how desperate and hopeless we were in our sin before Jesus rescued us, the beauty of the gospel shines more brilliantly than ever.

May God protect us from becoming complacent about the gospel. May we never reduce it to a formulaic set of right beliefs.

Instead, let's go out in boldness to broken and hurting people with the wonderful news that the loving creator of the universe wants to be reunited with them.

[CLICK] Reflection time

There are lots of us in this room and we'll all be in different places in terms of our heart towards God. Maybe you haven't yet entrusted your life to Jesus. If that's you, may I encourage you to talk and pray with someone after this session.

You might feel really close to God at the moment, or he might feel far away, but let's use this time to reflect on the gospel and thank God for the amazing gift that he's given us in Jesus.

1 - 2 mins of silent reflection to bring your hearts before God and then I'll pray to close.