

**Big idea:** The Gospel spreads through the servants of the Gospel, of whom Paul and us are part.

**FCF:** Paul is so different to us that his life is inapplicable to us.

**Application:** We are the same, but different, to Paul. We must understand what it means to be a servant of the Gospel.

### 1. The carriers...

I watched a zombie movie a few years ago. It is not a genre that I am that keen on, but it had Brad Pitt in it – ‘World War Z’. It was actually a thoughtful and provocative movie, even more so now that we are living in a viral-pandemic-kind-of-world. Brad Pitt plays a former UN investigator who is called in to investigate a virus that is zombifying the world. His job is to work out where it came from, how it is moving and how it can be stopped. In one sense, the carriers of the virus are obvious – those flesh-eating living dead are spreading the virus – 12 seconds after you are bitten you are one of them. But, the investigation is a little more subtle than that. In essence, it is focussed on working out how this virus has spread and what has caused it.

I suspect that a lot of people looked at the spread of Christianity in the first century in a similar way. How is this thing spreading? How is it having such an impact? What can be done about it?

As we observed last week, the central theme of the Gospel which is spreading – the virus, if you want to continue the analogy – is the

‘your King is able’, or, put another way, Jesus is Lord.. This message has changed people, like the Christians in Colossae. This Lordship has moved them from the domain of darkness into the kingdom of God’s Son – they now have peace with God.

But how is it spreading?

The answer is very simple – **look at Colossians 1:23... READ.**

It is spreading through carriers called ‘servants of the Gospel’, or ‘ministers of the Gospel’. I prefer ‘servants’. Paul is one of them. But, when we look at Paul, we scratch our heads. After all, he is in jail. He is reduced to writing letters to people he has never met. He looks a failure. How can the Gospel of the Lordship of Jesus Christ – which looked so magnificent last week – spread through men like this?

Today, we are going to look at what a servant of the Gospel looks like and why they were – and are – so confoundingly successful.

PRAY...

Let me give you a brief synopsis of where we have come from so far – just in case!

Paul and Timothy have been visited by Epaphras. Paul is in jail, in Rome, probably around 60-61AD. Epaphras had met Paul – and, most importantly, Jesus – in Ephesus and had taken this Jesus back to his hometown of Colossae – situated in a valley in modern-day Turkey.

In Colossae, Epaphras proclaimed Jesus. People heard the truth. They were transformed. And Epaphras continued to teach them (1:8). They are travelling well – just look at Paul’s thanksgiving prayer for them in 1:3-9. But, Paul continues to pray for them – that they know God and his will and purpose so that they continue with who they started with: Jesus – look at Paul’s prayer of request in 1:9-14. In essence, these men and women have changed their postcode – from the domain of darkness to the kingdom of God’s beloved Son, Jesus – and this has transformed them!

Paul and Timothy remind them that this Jesus, who is their Lord – they have changed postcodes, remember – is all that they need: he is able to transfer and transform them because of who he is – remember that magnificent picture we heard last week? They have no need to go anywhere else!

## **2. The servant(s) of the Gospel (1:24-29)**

Now, Paul finished his discussion of the Lordship of Jesus by talking of how God had applied it to his life – **look again at Colossians 1:23... READ.**

We have no pictures of Paul, nor do we have any descriptions of his physical appearance. But we do have a description – perhaps the most important description – of who he is as someone who serves this Gospel, which is the good news that Jesus is Lord.

### **(a) Joyfully suffering servant...**

Listen to Paul’s description of himself in **verse 24... READ.**

Paul describes himself as being 'joyful in suffering'. I want us to catch the meaning of what he is saying here. He is NOT saying that he bears up under stress. He is NOT saying that he 'grins and bears it' when life gets tough. He is NOT saying that he is stoic and keeps his mouth shut when times are tough. Remember, Paul is in jail, after a ship journey that included beatings, being wrecked, being marooned, and being under attack from both enemies and poisonous snakes.

In all this suffering, he is joyful. It is a mindset that is other-worldly in the sense that Paul rejoices in the suffering. As we will soon see, and as Jesus himself makes clear, suffering is the plan of God for his people, because they have Jesus as their Lord. Paul knows this, and rejoices that God would bless him in such a way.

How do we understand this?

Now, as we do, we must make sure we understand Paul clearly here. He is suffering FOR being under the Lordship of Jesus. This is not just suffering because the world is damaged by sin.

Paul knows that his sufferings are one and the same with the rejection that Jesus had. I suspect that this is the drive of the hard-to-understand part of verse 24. Jesus' sufferings lacked nothing when they came to being able to redeem people from sin – please hear me when I say that, because Paul has just said this! But, to follow him is to suffer like him – until he returns in glory. There is still suffering to undergo – joyfully – until that day for Paul and Timothy. We know that this is the lot of God's people – remember Jesus sending his apostles out like 'sheep amongst wolves'. God

himself knows this, having set the endpoint for such suffering (Mark 13:20; Romans 5:1-5). That is what is 'lacking' – the suffering yet to come because he is serving Jesus, and Paul is experiencing that suffering.

In this Paul rejoices – gives thanks, welcomes it, understands it, and prays through it.

**(b) ...for the church...**

Paul's suffering is not just for his benefit. Did you notice that he suffers joyfully for the community he is part of? Look again there at **verse 24... READ.**

Paul's service to the Gospel is his service to the Lord at the heart of the Gospel – and for his body. This is no intangible, spiritual thing. This suffering is for a definite group of people who share the same boss as Paul. It is amazing – as we will see – that Paul actually suffers for them even though he does not know them. In fact, Paul's language here is language that involves the whole universal church – across time and place. Paul serves anyone, at any time, in any place, who has Jesus as Lord. We will see in a moment what this involves...

**(c) ...by God's intervention and purpose...**

Paul did not choose this job – **look at verse 25... READ.**

The language used is the language of God's administration, or planning, of all things that have ever taken place. Paul has been given this job under the full planning of God. This job – and all that goes with it – comes by God's intention, purpose and wise planning.

Remember Paul's meeting with Jesus on the road to Damascus?  
Remember what God said he had in store for Paul?

In this sense, this job of Paul serves God's wider purposes. It is not for Paul's gratification – although that will come. It is not for Paul's reputation – though that will be forged in it. It is not for building Paul's little kingdom – it is for God's plans and the kingdom of God's Son.

Thus, everything that Paul experiences as a servant of the Gospel is under the plan of God. Nothing here is accidental.

**(d) ...to make known the mystery...**

So, what does Paul's job involve? **Look again at verses 25-26...**  
**READ.**

Paul has the job of making 'God's message fully known'. He has a speaking job, a job that involves proclaiming God's message. In fact, this is a message, from the human side, which is a 'mystery'.

This word – 'mystery' – when applied to God refers solely to his plans from the beginning of time, which he has always known, but which is now being made clear to humans. People like Paul – the servants of the Gospel – are at the heart of this making known.

In fact, the Gospel is another name for the mystery. It is God's plan and God's purpose for the world...

**(e) ...which is Christ in you (the Lordship of Jesus)...**

If it is a mystery that is made known, what is it? **Look at verse 27...**

**READ.**

The mystery is Jesus Christ – who he is as Lord of the universe. More specifically, the mystery is that through the Lordship of Jesus Christ, people like the Colossians (and us) – Gentiles – could have peace with God.

This is not a distant or abstract idea. It is the truth that Jesus is IN you – his Lordship is over your very life, because he bought it by dying for it, so that you, me and Paul could actually have peace with God. This is Paul's message. This is the 'virus' of which Paul is the carrier. And it is God's 'desire', his 'want', to have this mystery known to all peoples.

**(f) ...by proclaiming...**

How does Paul do this? **Look at verse 28... READ.**

Paul's favoured method of delivery – God's planned method of delivery – is verbal proclamation. It is the announcement of the news that Jesus is Lord. This is how this message is to be taken to everyone. On the one hand, it is 'warning' – bringing Christ to humans so that we know who we are: rebels, sinners, under the judgement of God, residents of darkness. On the other hand, it is 'teaching' – bringing people to a deeper and more complete understanding of this bloke, Jesus. For all, it is the spoken truth about the real truth that is this simple: Jesus is Lord.

But, notice how Paul has expanded his language here – he is not just speaking of ‘I’, but of ‘we’. You see, there is more than one carrier of this mystery, more than one servant of the Gospel – Epaphras is one, and Timothy, and the list goes on... And the location changes but the message and method does not.

**(g) ...so that all may be presented mature...**

What is the long-term plan of this work? **Look at verse 28 again... READ.**

The aim is to present everyone as ‘perfect’, as they should be, in Jesus. That is, as Paul suffers joyfully for the church, at God’s planning and for the proclamation that Jesus is Lord, his set plan is for the growth in maturity of God’s people – that the body of Jesus grows up. But, notice two things about this: first, this is the same as his prayer in Colossians 1:9-12, which was for people to know God’s will more deeply so that they can live more worthily; and second, this maturity is ‘in Christ’. At the heart of the maturity of Jesus’ body – of Christians – is that they do not leave this truth behind: Jesus is Lord is enough for both becoming a servant of the Lord, and growing as a servant of the Lord.

**(h) ...all by God’s strength.**

How will Paul do this? I don’t mean the method, but how is it possible for anyone to take up such a burden and load? **Look at verse 29... READ.**

Paul’s labour is driven by God’s power and strength. In many ways, this is intangible – how do you see this except in hindsight? But, it



returns us to the beginning, where our question was this: How does this news that Jesus is Lord travel?

It travels by the servants of the Gospel. But, in and of themselves, they are an unimpressive lot. On any worldly standard, Paul is a failure – a brilliant career rejected, a life of immense hardship and persecution, locked up in jail, with a death sentence over his head. And, yet, through letters like this, this man continues to spread this message: Jesus is Lord. The only explanation is that God is working through him. The impressive thing here is not Paul, but the God who uses Paul. In fact, stripped back, the answer to our question of how this news spreads is this: God through Paul. In this sense, the frail and failing tools that God uses directs our attention to him – it is his administration, his power, his mystery, his work, his Son, his kingdom!

### **3. Servants of the Gospel, for you (2:1-3)**

Paul's work as a servant of the Gospel is not abstract. In fact, his struggle is immense, even for people he has not met – **look at 2:1-3... READ.**

Paul reiterates his job: to help people have a deep and mature knowledge of, and that, Jesus Christ is the Lord. That is his struggle and desire, even for strangers.

But, I think we must notice the importance of **verse 3** in this ... **READ.**

Put bluntly, Jesus as Lord is all people need for life and especially all God's people need for life. In Jesus – who is the Lord – are ALL

wisdom and knowledge. They are kept in him, hidden in him. But, and this is the crucial thing, through Paul in God's work, they are being made known. Knowing the essence to all things is about knowing that Jesus is Lord. And so, the sufficiency of Jesus as Lord for all things lies at the heart of Paul's job: Jesus as Lord is enough for life (REPEAT).

And Paul works to make this clear to everyone he has met, and has not met.

#### **4. Do not be deceived (2:4-5)**

I sometimes wonder why I receive letters from people I do not know. Most of us do. If these people are clear writers, they will make their intentions clear. Paul is a clear writer – **look at verses 4-5... READ.**

The 'this' that Paul is referring to is as much to everything he has said about himself as it is to the immediately preceding sentence. On the one hand, he lays out his role as a servant of the Gospel for a purpose; on the other hand, he lays out the sufficiency of Jesus as Lord for the very same purpose: he does not want these members of Jesus' body to be deceived.

Here is the heart of Paul's concern – and we will spend more on this over the next few weeks. Paul's concern – in his prayers, in his proclamation, in his job, is that these fellow citizens in the kingdom of Jesus know that Jesus as Lord is enough – they must not be deceived into believing anything else.

Now, they actually seem to be doing well. Even not knowing them, and being absent physically, Paul has heard of how well they are doing. But the danger lurks that they will begin to think that the Lordship of Jesus is insufficient for life – that life consists of more than knowing Jesus, or less than knowing Jesus. Paul does not want this to happen – so he writes to them. In jail, he struggles for them in word so that they will remain persuaded that Jesus as Lord is enough. No matter how fine-sounding the alternatives, Jesus is Lord is enough.

### **5. We are servants of the Lord, too!**

The spread of the Gospel can be explained by the servants of the Gospel – men like Paul, Epaphras, and Timothy. These men were empowered by God, in a mission planned by God, to spread the message that the Lord Jesus Christ now ruled.

In many ways, we have nothing in common with these men. They lived at a different time, in a different culture, with completely different lives. They had a unique job that we will never have: the first messengers and servants of this news called the Gospel. What do we do with this, then?

On one level, all we can do – can I make such a bald understatement? – is give thanks to God for men like this. We are part of the church community, the body of Jesus, has not seen in person. Yet, his joyful suffering for the service of the Lord and his body was part of God's global and timeless plan to bring people like us to a day like today. That is something we should thank God for!

Perhaps more than that, we should be familiar with these men and women. Let me encourage you to get to know your spiritual predecessors – the servants of Jesus who have ensured that this truth is ‘proclaimed in all creation’. For parents, why not use... with your children? For adults, why not read...?

On another level, are we any different to Paul and Epaphras and Timothy? Let me be blunt: we share the same Lord, which means we share the same servanthood.

Now, specifically, they are different to us – their job was unique, at a unique moment. But, let me suggest to you that, in looking at Paul and the other servants of the Gospel, we catch a glimpse, a sketch, of our lives as servants of the same Lord. They are no better than us. That is part of the wonderful democracy of salvation in the Gospel. The one Lord rules, and we all serve him. And so here are some glimpses of servanthood for us, from Paul:

- Our servanthood will bring suffering. That is not a by-product, nor is it an accident – it is God’s purposeful planning of the lives of his people, so that they will ‘walk worthy of the Lord’.
- Our suffering as servants should be met with joy – it is both the privilege of having a Father who helps us mature and a natural part of following the Lord who purchased us by suffering. That joy is not flippant, nor is it ignorant of reality; it is not whinging nor blaming; it does not belittle the true effect of sin nor the damage of suffering. But, it does place suffering for the Lord as a privilege rendered to those who are growing in maturity.

- Our servanthood is of the Lord and the news that he is Lord, for the benefit of the whole church. Let me encourage you to think beyond the Narrabri Shire boundaries, beyond the diocese, beyond even Australia. Our perspective should encompass even those we have not met. That is the sensational thing about our mission partners – we can serve them by praying for their work as servants of the Gospel.
- Our servanthood will be one of proclaiming this news to the world. The spread of the Gospel does not happen through what we do, but what we proclaim. The evidence of our service to the Lord will be seen in our living, but the message is proclaimed in our speaking. In this sense, we must have the right co-ordination of proclamation and practice – proclaiming the truth of Jesus, and living that truth.
- Our servanthood is powered, and planned, by the very desire and strength of God. Let us not lose sight of this truth. It will be a truth evident in hindsight, when we acknowledge that some things are only ever survived and achieved by God's strength ad plans. But our servanthood has his engine.
- Our servanthood must not be deceived... and more on that next week.