

## **The Great Gift of the Gospel is God Himself**

By Pastor Andy Aikens

*The mystery which has been hidden from the past ages and generations; but has now been manifested to his saints,<sup>27</sup> to whom God willed to make known what is the riches of the glory of this mystery among the Gentiles, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory. Colossians 1:26-27 (NAS)*

When I walked into the gym, I spotted her immediately. I had been looking for a pick-up basketball game and found the girls volleyball team practicing instead. She had really long hair pulled back in a tight ponytail. I determined at that moment that I would find out who she was and ask for a date. It was weeks later before a mutual friend introduced us at a Baptist Student Union meeting and several days beyond that before we had our first date. She has the most beautiful smile and the most intelligent mind I have ever encountered. Right from the start we loved to talk. Like many young people who are courting each other, we spent hours getting to know each other. It felt like we could never spend enough time together, at least from my perspective. However, the best thing about those early conversations was not their length or intensity, but rather, the best thing was their leisure. The conversation was never forced, and when it lagged, we simply enjoyed being together. To me, there is no greater indication of enjoying another person than the ability to sit quietly together without the slightest feeling of discomfort. Now in our second decade of marriage, Hope and I still enjoy talking to each other and sitting quietly together.

A person's relationship with God should have a similar quality. I have never delighted in my wife simply because of the things she can do for me. I have delighted in her primarily because of who she is. I enjoy her thoughts and her company for the sake of her presence. The gospel promises the same thing in our relationship with God. He enjoys us, but more importantly we gain the great privilege of enjoying him. And, we enjoy him not merely for his gifts but primarily for the sake of his presence, which is the greatest gift of all.

The supremacy of God in the gospel is manifested by the fact that he is the great gift of the gospel. The great gift of the gospel is not merely escape from the punishment of sin. The great gift of the gospel is God's presence with his people.

Interestingly, this is not just a New Testament promise. God has always delighted in giving himself to his people. We see this throughout the Old Testament in the form of three covenant promises. The first promise is the blessing of his presence.

**God promises to give himself to Abraham** Genesis 15:1

After this, the word of the LORD came to Abram in a vision:

“Do not be afraid, Abram.  
I am your shield,  
your very great reward.”

**God promised to give himself to Aaron and the Levites** Numbers 18:20  
The LORD said to Aaron, "You will have no inheritance in their land, nor will you have any share among them; I am your share and your inheritance among the Israelites.

And Joshua 13:33 - To the tribe of Levi, Moses had given no inheritance; the LORD, the God of Israel, is their inheritance, as he promised them.

The second covenant promise God gives to the patriarchs and all Israel is the promise, "I will be with you."

**God's presence is confirmed in his covenant to Isaac** Genesis 26:3  
Stay in this land for a while, and I will be with you and will bless you. For to you and your descendants I will give all these lands and will confirm the oath I swore to your father Abraham.

**God promises his presence to Jacob** Genesis 31:3  
Then the LORD said to Jacob, "Go back to the land of your fathers and to your relatives, and I will be with you."

**God promises his presence to Moses and Israel** Exodus 3:12  
And God said, "I will be with you. And this will be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: When you have brought the people out of Egypt, you will worship God on this mountain."

**God promises his presence to Joshua and Israel** Joshua 1:5, 9  
No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

**God's presence empowers Gideon** Judges 6:16  
The LORD answered, "I will be with you, and you will strike down all the Midianites together."

**God's presence makes the difference for Solomon** 1 Kings 11:38  
If you do whatever I command you and walk in my ways and do what is right in my eyes by keeping my statutes and commands, as David my servant did, I will be with you. I will build you a dynasty as enduring as the one I built for David and will give Israel to you.

**God promises his presence in order to sustain Israel in Exile** Isaiah 43:1-2a

"But now, this is what the LORD says—

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

“Fear not, for I have redeemed you;

I have summoned you by name; you are mine.

<sup>2</sup> When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

The third covenant promise is God's promise to give himself to his people through the oath, “I will be your God and you will be my people.”

**Israel's hope and confidence in the Exodus and in Exile was based on the promise of God's presence**

Exodus 6:6-8

<sup>6</sup> “Therefore, say to the Israelites: ‘I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the yoke of the Egyptians. I will free you from being slaves to them, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgment. <sup>7</sup> I will take you as my own people, and I will be your God.

Jeremiah 7:22-23

<sup>22</sup> For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, <sup>23</sup> but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people.

Jeremiah 11:4

The terms I commanded your forefathers when I brought them out of Egypt, out of the iron-smelting furnace.’ I said, ‘Obey me and do everything I command you, and you will be my people, and I will be your God.

Jeremiah 30:21

<sup>21</sup> Their leader will be one of their own;  
their ruler will arise from among them.

I will bring him near and he will come close to me,

for who is he who will devote himself

to be close to me?’ declares the LORD.

<sup>22</sup> “So you will be my people, and I will be your God.”

God's presence was always the most significant blessing of the covenants. God's presence always made the difference in Israel's success. While traveling in the wilderness, God's presence was experienced in the cloud and the fire. His presence brought guidance, comfort, power, protection and salvation. However, even though God truly communed with Israel, his Old Testament presence was not permanent and was not complete. While God's presence was real, it was always veiled. The promises of scripture looked forward to something more, and all Israel looked forward to a future day of fuller blessing with anticipation.

## *Adam, the Garden and the Presence of God*

In order to grasp the significance of all this we must go back to the beginning. We must go back to a time before man was separated from God and in need of God's renewed presence. In Genesis 1-3 it is reported that God regularly communed with Adam. God walked with him and spoke to him directly. This intimate fellowship was the blessing of life in the garden. Nevertheless, Adam and Eve sinned against God, and the intimacy was destroyed. Man came under a curse and no longer enjoyed direct communication with God. The story of redemption, the gospel, is the story of restoring this fellowship. The list of scriptures in the first part of this chapter demonstrates the consistent promise to restore such fellowship, and they give a glimpse of how Israel experienced moments of restored fellowship. However, it was the plan of God to restore the full fellowship of the garden through an act of future redemption. God planned to grant his permanent presence to his people. Every instance of this promise in the Old Testament is a foreshadowing of the great day when God would grant his permanent presence to his people.

This fact became very clear in the ministries of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Jeremiah 31 and Ezekiel 36 look forward to the New Covenant blessing when God's presence would be permanent. Lets take the time to have a deeper look at how the Old Testament anticipates the permanent dwelling of God with his people, a dwelling that will ultimately be brought about by the cross of Christ.

In Jeremiah 31:31-34 we read that God intends to make a new covenant with his people:

<sup>31</sup> "The time is coming," declares the LORD,  
"when I will make a new covenant  
with the house of Israel  
and with the house of Judah.

<sup>32</sup> It will not be like the covenant  
I made with their forefathers  
when I took them by the hand  
to lead them out of Egypt,  
because they broke my covenant,  
though I was a husband to them,"  
declares the LORD.

<sup>33</sup> "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel  
after that time," declares the LORD.  
"I will put my law in their minds  
and write it on their hearts.  
I will be their God,  
and they will be my people.

<sup>34</sup> No longer will a man teach his neighbor,  
or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,'  
because they will all know me,  
from the least of them to the greatest,"

declares the LORD.  
“For I will forgive their wickedness  
and will remember their sins no more.”

This text says in verse 32 that the new covenant “will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers.” This raises the question; how will the new covenant be different from the old one? The answer resides in the rest of verse 32 and following. The phrase, “because they broke my covenant,” is the clue to the answer. The new covenant is different because it will be unbreakable.

Many interpreters try to point to verse 33 and emphasize the heart issue. They like to say that the OT was concerned with external obedience, but the New Testament is concerned with heart sincerity. However, a brief survey of the book of Deuteronomy reveals that the Old Covenant has always been concerned with the heart (Deuteronomy 4:9, 29, 39; 6:5, 6; 8:2; 10:12; 26:16; 30:1, 2, 6, 10, 14, 17). God has always desired the whole heart of his people.

Also, the promise in verse 33, “I will be their God and they will be my people,” is nothing new either, for this promise has always been the great aim of all God’s redeeming work. This has been made clear in the previous list of scriptures.

So, I return to the conclusion that the primary difference between the Old Covenant and the New is that the New Covenant is unbreakable. But, what are the indications of this in the Jeremiah passage. The indications are what I would call “intensifications.” The Old Covenant anticipated certain benefits for God’s people, and the New Testament delivers them. This gets communicated by intensifying the promises. Jeremiah notes at least three significant intensifying marks of the New Covenant, and the first intensification is, “I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts.” Notice, even though the heart is not a major distinction, the law *written* on the heart is. Prior to the work of Christ the law was written on tablets of stone. After Christ, the law is written on the hearts of God’s people. The Apostle Paul says as much in 1 Corinthians 3:3, “You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” Though Paul’s subject was slightly different the principle he is drawing from Jeremiah is the same. That principle is that the New Covenant delivers what the Old Covenant promised.

The second intensification is, “No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the LORD,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest.” Under the New Covenant God will commune with all his people. In the past God had granted his presence to a select few, like Abraham, the Levites, David, and the prophets to only name a few. However, once Christ comes and inaugurates the New Covenant all God’s people will know him. Many passages teach this truth, and we will look at a few of them a little further down.

The third intensification of the covenant is, “I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more.” Surely, God forgave sins under the Old

Covenant? It seems that the entire ceremonial system was designed solely for that purpose. And yet, the book of Hebrews 10:1-4 tells us,

"The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming—not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. <sup>2</sup> If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. <sup>3</sup> But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, <sup>4</sup> because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins."

This seems pretty clear then, particularly from what follows in Hebrews 10, that Jeremiah is promising a day when sins will be forgiven completely. The prophet is speaking of a day when sacrifices would cease because God would forgive his people of past, present and future sins. Hebrews 10:12-14 assures us this is the case, "when this priest (Jesus) had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. <sup>13</sup> Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, <sup>14</sup> because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy."

The New Covenant, through the death of Jesus, purchases the personal, powerful and permanent presence of God for the people of God. The death of Jesus purchases this great benefit of the gospel because through this death all the demands of the covenant are kept. This unbreakable, heart-written covenant is brought into existence through Jesus because Jesus keeps both sides of the covenant, God's side and man's side. This is what makes the covenant unbreakable. If Jesus has already kept your covenant obligations then you can't break the covenant through disobedience like the Israelites did. Jesus has kept the covenant on our behalf and we have intimate communion with the Lord as a result. Jeremiah calls this communion, knowing God. Almost four hundred years ago John Owen, in referring to the promise of Jeremiah 31, said the same thing, "the Lord did in the Old (covenant) only require the condition (the condition of obedience); now, in the New (covenant), he will also effect it."<sup>1</sup>

Let's try to understand what Owen means. The condition required is obedience. However, sinners cannot effect the condition. This means that they cannot bring it about. We are always breaking the condition of obedience through our disobedience. But, according to Jeremiah there will come a day when God will overcome our disobedience by effecting this obedience on our behalf. Look more closely at verse 34. Verse 34 says that all God's children will know him in the new covenant. God's children will experience this intimacy because God will forgive their sins. According to this text, the great benefit of the New Covenant is not merely forgiveness of sin, but rather, the forgiveness of sin leads to an even greater benefit, which is the knowledge of God. Jeremiah's promise emphasizes a new relationship with God that is found in the gospel.

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<sup>1</sup> John Owen, Death of Death. Pg. 125.

We see this most clearly in Hebrews 8. The writer of the book of Hebrews uses Jeremiah 31 to make a case for the superiority of Christ and the salvation that he brings. As stated earlier Hebrews 10:1 tells us, "The Law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming - not the realities themselves." So, even the Scriptures demonstrate an anticipation of better things to come. The same author also says in 8:7, "For if there had been nothing wrong with the first covenant, no place would have been sought for another." Then he quotes Jeremiah 31 and says that it is Christ, our great high priest, who has brought this new covenant into fulfillment.

The work of Christ on the cross purchases the presence of God in the life of God's children. Through the cross we may now know God in ways never before experienced. This is corroborated in John 17:3, which says, "Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent." This is the benefit that is purchased by the work of the great high priest in Hebrews 9. In verse 15 of that chapter we hear these words, "For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance." According to Hebrews 9:12 he has, "obtained eternal redemption." Jesus has entered the most holy place on our behalf and procured a complete salvation. This must mean that we have been restored to a more intimate communion with God, who is the great gift of the gospel.

Our second Old Testament text that anticipates God's permanent presence is Ezekiel 36:26-28.

"I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. <sup>27</sup> And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. <sup>28</sup> You will live in the land I gave your forefathers; you will be my people, and I will be your God."

Again, this is the promise of God's permanent presence with his people. He says, "I will put my Spirit in you." You may be wondering how this emphasizes the promise of a permanent presence. The answer rests in the fact that the Old Testament teaches that God did in fact dwell with his people. If God's presence was already being enjoyed in the Old Covenant, then how does the promise in Ezekiel add anything to the current situation? Before I can answer, I think it is important to say a few things about the nature of the Old Covenant blessing of God's presence.

God's presence with his people in the Old Testament was not permanent. This is best seen in David's prayer recorded in Psalm 51 (NIV).

<sup>10</sup> Create in me a pure heart, O God,  
and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

<sup>11</sup> Do not cast me from your presence  
or take your Holy Spirit from me.

<sup>12</sup> Restore to me the joy of your salvation

and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.

David had real concern that God would cease to commune with him because of his grievous sin. He had committed adultery, lied and murdered. David was aware that God had ceased to dwell with his forefathers for far less than this, and he was genuinely afraid. Therefore, he repented. Many times in the Old Testament the Spirit of God would come and go based on the obedience of God's people. Consider Samson. Once he broke his vow, the Spirit of God left him. King Saul is another good example. The Holy Spirit left him for good and was replaced by an evil spirit that tormented him. Given these considerations it is understandable why David prayed the way he did. It is also understandable why Israel looked forward to a new day when God would no longer come and go based on the obedience of the people.

It is my contention that Jeremiah and Ezekiel are prophesying this future change in the way God dwells with his people. They are looking forward to a day when God will do something more than he was doing in their day. Ezekiel says God will give a new heart and a new spirit. Jeremiah calls this event a new covenant, and yet they both summarize this promise with the old summary, "you will be my people, and I will be your God." None of this makes any sense unless God is revealing through this promise the hope of his permanent presence. No longer will God be distant. No longer will God come and go. In the new covenant he will reside in the hearts of his people forever.

The New Testament is full of confirmation that this is exactly what the ministry of Jesus purchases for the people of God. Jesus grants the great gift that all of Scripture anticipates, God himself. Ephesians 2:22 says, "In [Christ] you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit." Then, Galatians 2:20 says, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Also, Galatians 3:14 says, "He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus, so that by faith we might receive the promise of the Spirit." And, even more pointed is Colossians 1:26-27, "the mystery that has been kept hidden for ages and generations, but is now disclosed to the saints. To them God has chosen to make known among the Gentiles the glorious riches of this mystery, which is Christ in you, the hope of glory." In these texts Paul has in mind the whole scope of Redemptive history culminating in the permanent indwelling presence of Christ in his people.

It gets even better. This presence of God is the presence of all of God. Romans 8:9-11 teaches this when it says,

"You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness. And if the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead is living in you, he who raised Christ from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit, who lives in you."

This text displays the unity of the Trinity. 'The Spirit of God', 'the Spirit of Christ' and 'the Spirit' are used interchangeably in the text. As a Christian you have received the great gift of the gospel, God himself. The great gift of the gospel is not merely escape from the punishment of sin, as wonderful as that blessing is. The great gift of the gospel is God himself residing permanently in the believer. It is promised throughout the Old Testament, and it is fulfilled in the New!

### *Sharing this gospel and living with purpose*

As a result of this important thinking about the gospel at least two emphases in our thinking must change. To begin, when we do evangelism, what do we offer people by offering them the gospel? Do we merely offer them escape from the punishment of sin, or do we offer them God himself? If we only offer them escape from the punishment of sin, then it is quite certain that they are in danger of missing God, and consequently, the escape they so desperately want. To illustrate, when you purchase a plane ticket, you do not purchase it in order to have the ticket. The ticket symbolizes something greater. In order for the ticket to be of any value you must get on the plane and go somewhere. Many people think of their religious experience like buying a ticket. The problem is that they never get on the plane. Therefore, the ticket is worthless. Consider this, just because you do not want to go to hell does not mean that you want to be in a relationship with God. When your "salvation" is nothing more than walking an aisle or filling out a card, then you are like a man who buys a ticket and does not get on the plane. Yes, you have a piece of paper, but you are not going where you desire.

The second emphasis has to do with our purpose for living. Our salvation always takes aim at our hearts in two directions. There is that which we are saved *from* and there is that which we are saved *to*. We are saved *from* our sin, but that is not all. More importantly, we are saved *to* commune with God. The essence of eternal life is to know God (John 17:3). What we are "saved *to*" has been neglected by modern Christians, but must be no longer, if we are to have a proper walk with God. Imagine a drowning man just a few feet from a pier. In our lost condition we are more than drowning, we are dead. But, for the sake of illustration let's continue. Jesus is standing on the end of the pier and he rescues the man by throwing him a life preserver and pulling him to the dock. After the man is safely sitting on the dock, Jesus walks away never to be heard from again. Practically speaking, this is the salvation experience many have had, and it is very dangerous to assume that it is real. Jesus does not save us just for the sake of getting us out of the water. He saves us in order to enter into sweet communion with us. When Christ rescued us on the cross, he did this not only for our benefit, but also and primarily for God's glory. We do not sit on the pier; we get up and follow the savior, so that we can worship him in gratitude for what he has done. There is a purpose in the cross that is bigger than man. We were not only saved from our sins, but we were saved to worship God. Therefore, we must treasure God above all. In fact, if there is no worship then there is no

salvation. Jesus does not pull anyone out of the water to leave him or her on the pier.

The intimate, powerful, personal and permanent presence of God is the great gift of the gospel. Our relationship with Christ is to be like the relationship of lovers who enjoy each other's company, intimate and sweet. Christ's sacrifice on the cross purchases this relationship for us. He purchases it so that just as Adam experienced the intimacy of God's presence in the Garden of Eden, we too might experience that same intimacy through God permanently dwelling in our hearts.