

The supernatural gospel

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[0 : 00] Well, greetings to you all from the college and all my colleagues on the faculty, and we certainly are delighted at the great work that's next to him here with you folk. All right, well, what is our title for today?

Well, I hope you've got your Bible open in front of you. You're in the letter of Paul to the Galatians. We're just going to focus a little bit here and there on the first chapter, and the title for this morning is The Supernatural Gospel.

That'll be our title. Now, if you cast your eye over the first few verses of the letter, you'll see that certainly it is a letter, and that's something you need to notice.

Sometimes we don't always observe that there are letters in the New Testament, and letters, of course, were written from somebody to another party, normally for a very, very good reason. It was quite a big job to write a letter in the ancient world.

It wasn't easy. It took quite a lot of work, a lot of time. Now, this is probably Paul's earliest letter. And today, as we start out and as we look at, say, the first ten or so verses of the first chapter, there are two things that stand to mind that we need to look at as we start.

[1 : 06] The first is that when you look at those verses, as read out to us a minute ago, you'll see that Paul is worried. Paul is clearly worried about something. He clearly is aware of the fact that a crisis has developed in these Galatian churches.

Paul moved into this area around about A.D. 49 or so, 20 or 30 years, 20 years after Jesus' death and resurrection.

You're looking at modern-day Turkey. And he went out there and he planted these churches. But when he left and in his absence, other teachers moved in and began to preach something else. They began to preach a gospel clearly other than the one Paul preached. And Paul is very, very concerned about this. Now, the second thing, by way of an introduction, and this introduces our subject for today, in response to the agitators, to these troublemakers, these false teachers who had come into the churches, Paul insists that his gospel is the only true gospel because it is a supernatural gospel.

And so today, I'm going to look at primarily three questions with you. First of all, we're going to ask, what is a supernatural gospel? Secondly, why is believing in a supernatural gospel important?

[2 : 35] Thirdly, what are the consequences of believing in a supernatural gospel? And then finally, I'm going to wrap up with the question, what kind of people serve a supernatural gospel?

So let's start out with our first question. What is a supernatural gospel? Let's have a look at a couple of verses from our text. For example, let's have a look at the first verse. You'll observe how strong Paul is as he introduces himself.

Paul, an apostle, not from men nor through man. It's a strange way to start a letter, isn't it? Not through men nor through man.

But through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead. Clearly, he's under attack, you see. He's under attack and he starts out his letter and he wants to make sure the Galatians know exactly where he's coming from.

You cast your eye down to verse 11 and 12. Notice what he says. He's very, very, very clear here. And he writes as the apostle of the church.

[3 : 40] And what we are reading here today is the very words of God. We need to understand that as the great apostle writes in verse 11 and verse 12. For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel.

For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ. Now, when we talk about the gospel, what do we mean?

It's important for us to remember and to ask ourselves what the gospel is. Well, when we talk about the gospel, of course, we're talking about Jesus, aren't we? We're talking about the story of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins and rising from the dead.

This is the gospel. By this we are saved. Now, once again, Paul is very, very direct. Even one might suggest rude in his introductory portion to this letter.

And he insists on two things right at the start. First of all, observe, he insists that his calling, his calling to preach was a supernatural thing.

[4 : 56] Calling. Calling. And then secondly, the gospel itself, again, is a supernatural gospel. Now, the Oxford Dictionary defines supernatural as that which transcends nature, unnaturally or extraordinarily great, or for our purposes today, divine.

So, in other words, the Christian gospel doesn't originate in this world. It does not stem from the minds or the creative powers of human beings.

The gospel might have a home in this world, to be sure. It can be explained in words we can understand. Praise God. But the gospel does not originate in the human imagination.

It comes from God. God might have used human instruments, such as the apostles of the New Testament or the prophets of the Old Testament, as his instruments to bring his gospel and his word.

But the gospel, indeed the very word of God, did not ultimately come from human beings. It is God's gospel.

[6 : 09] It is a supernatural gospel. Now, there might be a great deal about church life, which we might term as mundane. Church life sometimes is very much subject to routine.

We are folk who enjoy routine. We tend to sit in the same pew on a Sunday morning. We go through a similar kind of church program when we come to church on Sunday.

Not only that, but we have the same program when we wake up on Sunday morning. And for those of us as parents, we know what lies ahead of us. We've got to get the kids out of bed and dressed.

We've got to go through the same routine, and we come to church.

And we hear sermons, praise God, from the same Bible. But we are reminded today by the apostle, by the word of God, that at the heart of things, we owe our Christian existence to a supernatural reality, the very power of God in the world today, the gospel.

We forget this so easily, don't we? Because we live in a society conditioned not to believe in anything supernatural at all.

[7 : 20] Many of us live in a home where we share our space with cynics and skeptics. Others of us rub shoulders with unbelievers in the workplace.

We have cynical people in our families, don't we? We live in a world that is constantly undermining the supernatural power of the gospel.

Perhaps you've found in your particular case that doubt has entered into your mind and your heart because of this very problem. Living in a cynical world.

Living in a world of unbelievers. Living in a world of cynics. Well, we forget, don't we, so easily. In a society conditioned not to believe in anything supernatural, we forget how privileged we are.

Because if we are Christians, says the Apostle Paul, we are the custodians of the most precious resource in the world, the supernatural gospel.

[8 : 20] The power of God in the world. We need to take that seriously, Paul says to the Galatians. We need to take that deadly seriously, he writes.

So, a supernatural gospel is something that originates not in the minds and in the imaginations of men and women, but in the very mind of God.

Now, secondly, we need to ask, why is believing in a supernatural gospel important? Well, the answer, of course, is that, praise God, the supernatural gospel is not the kind of gospel man would invent.

You see, if man tried to invent his own way of saving himself, well, man's gospel, of course, would look very different to God's supernatural gospel. Over the years as I have preached the gospel to my own church, in the years that have gone by, this fact has impressed itself on my mind and my heart increasingly.

The more you study the gospel, the more you realize that man simply would not have invented this gospel. Of course, we've heard the gospel many times, and we're used to it for the most part, and sometimes its power and its unique nature is lost on us.

[9 : 40] But think about it again. Jesus says the gospel is the king of mankind. Even though the Bible also says he was a nobody from a small town in a small country tucked away in the middle of nowhere.

And yet the gospel insists that this man, this Jewish man, is none other than God himself. Then we are told that Jesus is mutilated in the most terrible way on the cross, bearing the shame and the punishment for our sins.

And then we are called to worship him because of this, because of his terrible death. In fact, his death, says the scripture, establishes his reign over the world.

And then incredibly, he rises from the dead and ascends into heaven. That is the gospel. And then even more counterintuitively, we are told that if we want to know the power of God in the world, if we want to discover the supernatural saving power of this gospel, all we need to do is trust.

Now, I'm sure you live in the same world that I live in. In the world that I live in, we are told that everything we want, we have to earn. If we want anything, we've got to work for it. Certainly was like that up in Johannesburg, and I think it's increasingly becoming like that in Cape Town.

[11 : 13] And yet the gospel tells us that all we need to do to come to know the supernatural power of the gospel and God in our lives is to trust in Jesus completely to be saved.

Now, folks, surely I suggest to you today, human beings would not have invented this gospel. And we can be very grateful, can we not, that the gospel comes from God and not man, because we know that human beings are sinners, aren't they?

Human beings are flawed in their thinking, in their minds. That if the gospel found its origins in the imagination of human beings, well, it would always be a flawed gospel, would it not?

And therefore, if there is going to be a gospel that saves us, it will have to be a supernatural gospel. See, that's why it's so important that you support Nick in his program of outreach to bring people in from the community to watch a movie, because that, at the end of the day, is not what we're trying to do.

If you truly believe in the supernatural saving power of the gospel, you'll get behind Nick in the attempt to bring this great gospel into the hearts and the minds of people in our community.

[12 : 33] Surely that is the most important task that God has given to mankind. So the supernatural gospel is not the kind of gospel man would invent. That's why believing in a supernatural gospel is so important.

Well, let's look at our third question, and that is, what are the consequences? What are the consequences of believing in a supernatural gospel?

And there are a few that I would like to share with you. First of all, if it is a supernatural gospel, if it is God's gospel, we must obey it. Paul is very clear on that.

If this gospel is the only gospel, if it is God's gospel, then it is the most precious commodity in the world, and we need to obey it.

We need to honor it. We don't do that by locking it away in a safe, but by living it out and proclaiming it. If the gospel is God's supernatural saving message to us, we need to obey it.

[13 : 42] You might come to church and hear the gospel on a Sunday, but do you obey the gospel? If we believe that this gospel is the most precious commodity in the world, that it is God's gospel, that it is a supernatural gospel in its origins, a new sense of humility needs to enter into our lives when we live in its presence.

We need to take it seriously, writes the Apostle Paul. We mustn't pussyfoot around the gospel. We mustn't play fast and loose with the gospel.

We need to take it seriously, says the Apostle. Now, secondly, if the gospel is a supernatural gospel, we must not only obey it, we must defend it.

You come and visit us at the George Ritual College, and you come into the main entrance, you approach this beautiful staircase. I think the main building was built in around about 1929 or 1930. It belonged to some very, very rich people. In fact, their garage is now three lecture rooms, I think. Quite incredible. And when you come in, there's this beautiful wooden staircase, and you go up the staircase, and you come to the landing where the officers are upstairs, and there is this magnificent display case, and I think there's an ancient prayer book in there, and I think there's a very, very old Bible.

[15 : 01] It must be a couple of hundred years old at least. It's a very precious old Bible, and we've had to lock it up in this display case to protect it and to guard this Bible.

But, of course, we don't defend the gospel by locking it up. We defend God's supernatural gospel by proclaiming it. Notice what Paul says in verse 1, verse 6, should I say, chapter 1, verse 6 to verse 9.

I am astonished, he writes to these Galatians, that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel, not that there is another one.

Now, by the way, if you were in the ancient world and you wrote an ancient letter in the ancient world, this part of the letter is where you say nice things to the recipients. This part of the letter is a kind of an introductory thanksgiving where you say nice things and thank them for the work that God is doing in their lives.

If you're writing to a church, look at the letter to the Philippians. But notice what he says here. Go back to verse 6. I am astonished. Wow, that's harsh.

[16:06] That you are so quickly, that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel, not that there is another one.

But there are some who trouble you and want to distort the gospel of Christ. Now, how about the next couple of verses? But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned or accursed.

If that isn't rude and harsh enough, he says it again in verse 9. As we have said before, now I say again, if anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed. That's how serious the apostle is. If God has only given to the church one supernatural gospel, then this gospel is the only gospel there is.

And there is no other gospel. No other gospel is the gospel, says the apostle Paul. Now, of course, we know, we live in an environment where many claim that there are multiple gospels, which at the end of the day all talk about the same God, allegedly, just in different ways.

[17:22] Paul says that's rubbish. Paul insists that there is only one gospel and he is willing to defend it and so too must we.

That's our second consequence. If it is a supernatural gospel, if it is God's gospel, we must defend it. We must live it out. We must stand up for it.

Now, if there's one thing we learn in life, of course, and that is if there is anything precious in the world, if there's anything worthwhile, well, it will always be copied, imitated and distorted by people for their own gains.

People have said to me over the years, well, if your gospel is the only gospel, why are there so many other gospels? Well, you shouldn't be surprised. If you get a genuine valuable watch, a Rolex watch, you're always going to get copies.

You're always going to get fakes. Apparently in the FBI, the way they train their agents in the Treasury Department to identify a counterfeit dollar bill is not to spend years and years and years looking at every single counterfeit bill that comes their way, but to know the original bill very, very well.

[18:36] Well, we mustn't be surprised if there are other gospels. Because if there is anything precious in the world, it is always going to be copied, imitated and distorted by people to their own ends.

We mustn't be surprised if that happens. That's what happened here in these churches in Galatia. Paul realized as he wrote this letter that the stakes couldn't be higher.

The souls of the Galatians were on the line. And so together with Paul, as we hear his call, we must also be ready to stand up and defend it and to know it and to study it, to attend a Bible study on a Wednesday or a Tuesday night.

It's tough, isn't it, coming home from work, having a quick bite to eat and going off to Bible study. It's much easier just to vegetate in front of the television set, isn't it? Well, you see, you feed your soul when you come to Bible study because you come to know the gospel more and more and as you do so, of course, you're more able to defend it against counterfeits.

Paul, in chapter 2, from verse 4 to verse 5, talks about a meeting. There's a meeting they held in Jerusalem not long before he wrote this letter.

[19:54] And Paul arrived at the meeting to talk about his gospel and these false brothers sneaked into the meeting, very similar to the kind of people who were trying to hijack the Galatian church.

They tried to hijack Paul at this meeting. They tried to confront him. They tried to criticize him in his gospel. He writes this in Galatians 2 from verse 4 to verse 5.

He talks about this meeting and what happened. He says, Yet because of false brothers secretly brought in who slipped in to spy out our freedom that we have in Christ Jesus so that they might bring us into slavery, to them we did not yield in submission even for a moment so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for you.

That's how seriously Paul took his calling as an apostle. An apostle of the supernatural gospel. He knew that standing on the truth of the gospel was critically important and that the very life and the soul of the early church was at stake.

Such was the great gift and insight that God had given to this man. Third consequence of believing in a supernatural gospel is that it must be true.

[21 : 20] It must be true. Have a look at verse 5 of chapter 2. We did not yield in submission even for a moment so that the truth, so that the truth of the gospel might be preserved for the church, for you.

we have the same mighty, awesome mandate today to stand for the truth of the gospel. Now I know that for some of us this is obvious but it needs to be said if our gospel is God's gospel, if it comes not from the minds of men and women but from the mind of the Holy Trinity itself, if it is a supernatural gospel, if it doesn't have its origins in this world, if it is an expression of the very mind of God then it must be a true gospel.

It originates from God. It cannot contain a lie. Now friends, something else follows from this. The Bible is God's gospel book.

It must also therefore be a true Bible. We cannot claim on the one hand that the word of God has its origins in the mind of God, that it is a supernatural word if it is full of mistakes and errors.

If we think that the gospel has mistakes, if we think that the New Testament contradicts itself, well then the mistake lies with you and lies with me.

[22 : 54] I've discovered that over the years. I've tried to look at every single unbelieving argument, every single cynical argument that tries to reject the veracity, the truthfulness of the word of God.

In my view, none of them really hold any water. It must be true. And if it is true, you can rely on it. It doesn't matter what you're going through today.

It doesn't matter what doubts you're facing, what anxieties and struggles you're going to have to deal with this week. Many of us are going through difficult times. Well, if it is God's gospel, if it is the truth, we can rely on it.

It means that everything the gospel tells you about mankind, about you, and about me and the world and Jesus is true. Even the things we don't necessarily want to hear, those things are true as well.

That is the third consequence of believing in a supernatural gospel. It must be true. Now, our fourth consequence is that if it is a supernatural gospel, well, we must listen to those entrusted with the task of presenting the supernatural gospel to us.

[24 : 11] Have a look at the first verse of the letter. Notice how Paul asserts in the power of the Spirit of God is authority as an apostle. Paul, an apostle, not from men, nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father who raised him from the dead.

You see, this verse reminds us that not everybody is called to be an apostle in the same way that Paul was called to be an apostle. Not everybody has been chosen by God to write the New Testament, to be part of those prophets who brought about the composition of the Old Testament. Not everybody has been chosen by God to bring the original supernatural gospel to the church. A great deal of pastors today sure might be called to teach it.

I might teach it, Nick might teach it, but not many have been commissioned by God to bring it to the world in the first place. I do not have the authority of the writers of the New Testament.

There's a difference between today's pastor and Paul and James and John and Matthew and Luke and so on. And so today's preacher can only say that he is preaching in God's name provided he is speaking out of the gospel, out of the Bible, provided he is a servant of this gospel himself.

[25 : 39] You see, if the power of God lies in the supernatural gospel itself, then it doesn't lie in the modern-day preacher of the gospel. Think about a church in Gauteng, predictably a very rich church that had invested something like half a million rand on sophisticated technology, computer technology linked up to some spotlights that had the capacity to change color and move around on these little railings above the stage in this huge church, so that every time the pastor preached the spotlights would follow him around and change color depending on the kind of mood he desired to impress upon the congregation.

Well, we all need to be reminded today that the power of God in the world does not lie in the preacher himself or in the subtle lighting or in the beauty of the music even if there's a place for that. If it is a supernatural gospel, then the power of God lies in the gospel itself. You need to reflect on that because in a lot of churches today, the emphasis is not placed on the gospel or the teaching of the Bible but on the personality of the preacher.

The congregation is taught to believe that the supernatural power of God resides in the capacity and the rhetorical ability of the preacher and not in the words of the Bible, not in the teaching of the Bible.

But you see folks, if the preacher is merely there to teach people out of the word of God the supernatural gospel, then we also need to conclude that a supernatural gospel is more important than the human agent today who teaches it.

[27 : 23] If you go to a church where the pastor and the preacher does not explain and teach and apply the Bible, the gospel, go to another church. It doesn't matter how comfortable the church might be, it doesn't matter how rich the church might be, how nice it might be going there.

If only the supernatural gospel can save souls and build up the church, we need to go to a church where the gospel is honored and taught. It's the most important thing that the church does. Remember some elderly ladies in my congregation telling me that I need to visit them more often. One elderly lady felt I needed to visit her once or twice or three times a week. And I said I'd love to do that but I need to spend that time in the office preparing my sermon because I need to study the Bible.

I need to study the Bible before I come and preach on a Sunday. My personal opinions won't change the church. I need to explain and teach the Bible. I don't think she really understood me. That's why we have a George Whitfield College. That's why I gave up local church ministry to go to the George Whitfield College in order to play a small role in training young men and young women full time for three years so they can be the best Bible teachers they can be because if we are not teaching the supernatural gospel, if we are not explaining the very word of God the apostle implies the church will implode.

[28 : 49] There will be no more, no more church at all. The Bible teaches nothing more than a servant of the supernatural gospel. Fifth consequence of believing in a supernatural gospel and then we're going to come to our conclusion.

Fifthly, if the gospel is God's supernatural, gospel, then people will only come to accept it ultimately through supernatural means. Paul speaks about the supernatural reality of being a believer in Galatians 4 and verse 6 where he speaks about as children of God, as sons and daughters of God, God has sent the spirit of his son into our hearts crying Abba Father.

So not only is the gospel a supernatural gospel but we come to accept the gospel through supernatural power through the power of the spirit. If the spirit does not work in our church, if the spirit does not work in us, we'll never plant churches, we'll never see people saved, we'll never even accept the gospel.

people. We come to church on Sunday, we need to remember that we are living in a supernatural environment, a supernatural world, we believe in a supernatural kingdom and if you don't open yourself up to the supernatural gospel to change us, none of us will accept the work of the spirit in our midst.

When John stood up and preached for those folk, it's meaningless, isn't it? Unless we believe in a supernatural God and a supernatural spirit who hears our prayers.

[30 : 21] Standing up on a Sunday morning and leading a congregation in prayer and urging you to pray for these missionary folk, well that just means nothing. Are you open to the power of the supernatural spirit in your life?

Do you believe in the power of the spirit working in this congregation? That's why giving some money towards the projector is so much more than just oh well it's a projector, it's about investing in eternity.

Yes, even giving money to a projector, tithing on a Sunday. Getting saved or being born again is a supernatural event and that is why anti-supernaturalists or rationalists and cynics don't believe in a supernatural Bible, well they'll never become true believers and neither will you if you're a person.

Yes, the gospel is amenable to reason, yes. The gospel is based on historical fact. Jesus Christ lived and died and historically rose from the dead just like any other historical event, yes.

It's historical, it's real. But reason isn't enough to explain it. It's a supernatural gospel and it works in our hearts and in our church through the power of the spirit and if you don't accept this of course you'll never understand what Christianity is and what the fuss is all about.

[31 : 50] I can also say something else and that is people who don't believe in the supernatural power of the gospel soon give up on Christian service, won't they? Being involved in the local church, especially when you discover that the church is full of sinners.

You get involved in the local church and you help out a little bit here and there, you find people can let you down, people come late to do duty. I always used to get fed up about that as a pastor. Somebody's supposed to come and hand out the notices on a Sunday and they come late and they wake up late.

You know, you get involved in the local church, you discover, well, the local church is full of normal sinful people. It's not always easy to work with imperfect people but the reason why we do it, the reason why it remains worthwhile serving God amidst imperfect people, tithing every month, being willing to serve in simple tasks like tea duty is because I believe there is a supernatural power in this church.

I believe that this is a gospel church and the power of the gospel is released in the preaching in this church through the teaching and the preaching of the gospel. That's why we put up with imperfect people.

That's why we put up with an imperfect church because there's something bigger, there's something more important than all of us working in our midst. So as I close, Christians are people, therefore, who live towards a supernatural goal.

[33 : 09] See, I like to call Christians supernaturalists. Sometimes I think that non-Christians and cynics are naturalists. You see, on one level, Christians are no different from other people.

We get old and we get sick. We have our problems like everybody else. But don't let that fool you. Christians are different because we believe in a supernatural gospel and the power of a supernatural spirit shapes our existence.

Isn't that so? See, we believe that our everyday lives are shaped by a supernatural God through the supernatural gospel. You might ask, well, how can I know if I really do believe in this gospel, Mark? How can I know whether or not I really do believe in a supernatural gospel or not? Well, of course, it will show in the way you live, in your priorities, won't it? Believing in a supernatural gospel results in a way of living very different to so-called unbelievers or cynics or naturalists.

People who, at the end of the day, place their trust in non-supernatural materialistic things. But Christian people, people who believe in a supernatural gospel will live towards a supernatural end.

[34 : 24] Why would a young couple want to go off into contemporary Burma and live in a downtrodden community with all these diseases? They must be crazy. Who wants to go live anywhere where there's no medical aid and first-class medical care?

Well, not if they're supernaturalists. Because people who believe in a supernatural gospel will live towards a supernatural end. Their trust will ultimately be in a supernatural reality.

In heaven and not in the things of this world. And as a result of this, they'll live differently, won't they? They'll spend their money differently. And their objectives, their ethics will be different.

Because a supernatural gospel will shape us towards a supernatural end. Amen. Let's pray together.

Father, we just bow before you this morning and we come to you as needy people, broken people. And we acknowledge our great need for you.

[35 : 27] But we thank you for the great word of the apostle today. The reminder that the gospel is your voice in the world.

That your Bible is the very words of God. That it is dependable. That the gospel is the very power of God. That when we preach it and teach it, it's released into the world, into our community.

Father, rekindle in us a great passion, great love for the gospel. Give us a renewed desire to see it preached.

To see the work of Nick and the pastoral staff in this church go out into the community. So that we can bring this great gospel to others.

Lord, we pray that you, through the power of your spirit, would do a great work in this community.

Through the power, through the sustaining grace of the supernatural gospel.

[36 : 33] Amen.