

The Gospel Taking Root (Parts I, II, & III)

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Part 1

"He is going to hell!" I sat in my wicker chair, dumfounded by my two Zambian friends. A missionary with our team had been creating a 12 week basic discipleship course crafted for Zambians, using cultural illustrations and simple verses to help them understand the gospel.

The first lesson started off with the following illustration: A Christian man got on a mini-bus (the form of transportation here in Lusaka) and forgot to pay the driver and the driver forgets to collect the money. Midway through the bus ride, the Christian man remembers that he did not pay the driver but decides not to say anything. He gets off the bus and then gets hit by a car and immediately dies. My friend then asks the question in the study, "Will this man go to Heaven or Hell?" My friend shared with me after explaining this story, "I have never met a Zambian who didn't say hell. They just don't understand the gospel." I found this too difficult to believe, so I decided to try it out during a weekly bible study with a couple Zambian friends. I had been spending months with them going through the scriptures and was fairly confident they would say Heaven.

I would prove him wrong. But, sure enough, both of them confidently said, "Hell!"

"Hell?!?" I exclaimed, "Why does he go to Hell?"

They responded in unison "Because he sinned."

I was so stunned I didn't know how to answer.

I know that even in America there are denominations that would agree with my Zambian friends assessment of salvation, that you can lose your blood-paid salvation. They are members of churches that would ignore the ingenious interwoven tension between predestination and perseverance. But, at least most are educated enough to make that decision. But, in Africa, the problem goes much deeper. There are pastors across denominational lines that seek to control their congregations with a legalistic and joyless religion that keeps people obeying out of fear rather than love.

These pastors either out of lack of education or a quest for power heap burdens on their people and do not lift a finger to help them out. So, their eternal destiny lies in the power of one badly timed decision. After recovering from my shock, I had them open the bible to Ephesians and read the first 15 verses. After a conversation explaining the importance of predestination and sealing, the young lady's smile seemed to beg the question, "Is this just too good to be true? "

After sharing about how grace motivates obedience because of God's lavishing love, it was as if saw a physical burden lifted from her shoulders. Her smile said it all.

That next week I posed the same question during a talk on the gospel at a preaching conference with about 50 pastors. More than half responded that that same young man was going to hell while a smaller minority raised their hand believing that somehow this man would still go to heaven. I looked at one of the majority pastors and said, "Are you married?" He replied, "Yes, I am." "Do you ever sin against your wife?" He smiled and said, "Yes, I have sinned against my wife." In spite of the translation transition, the pastors saw where I was going and they began laughing and speaking rapidly in Nyanga, their native tongue. "Well, I asked slowly, "Are you still married?" He didn't even need to finish the sentence because he knew why I was asking the question. I continued, "But you sinned against her. How can you still be married?" I then asked about my adopted daughter. "If my adopted Zambian daughter, the one I chose, the one I love, were to sin against me, is she still my daughter?" I led them through some very basic verses about the gospel how God chose us, adopted us and sealed us and in just a few minutes, a very major doctrine became clear.

Of the minority that did raise their hand that this man was going to Heaven, five were in our ACTION Pastor's College and a few others had gone through our 1 year discipleship course. I was delighted to see they understood, and that the teaching was paying off. It doesn't take much to bring a freedom to serve by faith. It doesn't take much, just some time letting the Bible transform a culture so that the Word can expose the lies and reveal the truth. Perhaps it just takes some blessed feet to bring the good news to these Christians so they can be born again for the first time.

Part II

Like a pair of well-worn jeans or a Honda Accord that just keeps on driving, I intend to use this Mini-Bus illustration until its edges are frayed and every last soul in Zambia has answered the question to God's liking.

I was in a taxi on the way to class. I would normally take the mini-bus when my wife needs the car, but this day, I had run late with my weekly bible study, and so taxi it was. I got in the front and started in on some conversation about the World Cup. It is a great conversation starter because you are guaranteed a conversation wherever you are. But, it flopped. Hard. He didn't care or he couldn't speak English. I wasn't sure. I sighed. It is one of the struggles living here in Zambia, trying to have conversations, at a deep level, with people who just don't have a large capacity to converse. I don't remember another word for about 10 minutes. Finally I asked, "Do you go to church?"

He said, "Yes."

Most everyone does, at least have a church they call as their own.

"Pentecostal Holiness. In Matero." "Are you a Christian?" I asked.

"Yes." He responded.

I pressed in deeper. "What does it mean to be a Christian?"

"You accept Jesus in your life."

"What does that mean?"

"What do you mean, what does that mean?"

"What does it mean to accept Jesus?"

"You believe in Him that He died on the cross for our sin."

"How does accepting him help?"

And so the conversation ensued.

I have been studying the gospel a lot lately, and so it was fresh on my mind. I asked him what the gospel was. He tried to explain it, but when pressed for verses, he came up blank.

We reached my office, and we made an agreement for him to pick me up at 17 (5:00pm for you non 24 hour clock people). I told him I would share the verses with him about the gospel when he picked me up. So, after a great class, he was there, at 17, mzungu time. He was a bit surprised when the one of my pastors, Patson Sakala, got in the car with me, but after five minutes of driving, the taxi driver said, "You said you were going to share some verses with me." I said, "Yes, I will, but let me first ask you a question. There was a Christian who got in a mini-bus (same story, but in case you didn't read part one) and forgot to pay and the conductor forgot to ask. Midway through the ride, the Christian remembered and yet decided not to pay. He felt a little guilty, but figured it was the conductors fault. He got out the car, looking back to make sure the conductor wasn't coming after him, and didn't see the oncoming car which hit him and he was instantly killed. Is the man going to heaven or hell?" The man, smiled, paused for a moment, and then said, "Hell. He's going to hell. He sinned, so he is going to hell."

I am not surprised anymore. I haven't had heard the "Heaven" answer yet. I asked, "Are you married? Yes. I am married. Have you sinned against your wife? Yes. Are you still married? Yes, I am still married. But, you have sinned against her." Pause. Longer pause.

We shared some verses. Then I let Patson at him. He was like a pit bull. He was

nice and loving, but a pit bull nonetheless, being held back by his master, because when I said, "Patson, do you have anything to add, he practically jumped into my seat with passion and tenacity. He used the illustration of the driver being a taxi driver. If you crashed, would you still be a driver? Yes. If you drove bad, would you still be a driver? Yes. We sin. We are sinners. But God paid for all our sin on the cross. It doesn't change the fact that you are still a Christian even if we do sin." As he pulled up to my gate, I gave him my bible, with the verses written on the front, from Romans 1-4 that give a clear illustration of the Gospel. He was very grateful. Overwhelmed, I think. And grateful. "Any time you need a ride, just call," he said.

The next class, I started teaching on the gospel. And, just for the heck of it, I shared that story again. And guess what, four pastors thought (with conviction) that this man was going to hell. I was surprised, as well. So, I went to work. "Are you married? Do you sin? Are you still married?" I made my first chink in the armor. Second, I asked, "I called, chose, adopted Rhoda, and gave her a new name, future, inheritance and life. If she sins, is she no longer my daughter?" Another chink.

I asked them to find me verses that would support their position. Somewhere in Isaiah. Man is separated by sin. A verse from Hebrews. Another verse from Romans. The rest of the "heaven" guys just sat patiently, quietly, humbly, waiting.

If the Christian guy deliberately sins, he deserves hell." One pastor said, passionately.

I asked, "What if he forgot to pay. I mean, he still stole, but he just forgot. Is he still going to hell?"

"Uh. Well, I don't know. I don't think so."

"So, only sins that you do intentionally? How about a lesser sin than that? How bad a sin would require hell?" He didn't really have an answer for that question.

I moved between the four guys asking different questions to reveal the works based salvation they didn't know they believed. I made it personal by using two guys in the group, one was going to hell and the other going to heaven, representing the two differing views of the group.

"Which guy do you want to be? What do you want to believe?" "I want to believe I am going to Heaven."

"Of course you do. There is no joy living a life where one bad timed decision could land you in Hell."

But I didn't reveal my hand, just yet. I knew that I was running out of time and so I decided to save my heavy artillery for the next class. I asked another, "God knows everything, right? He knows when you are going to die before you are

even born. He knows the number of hairs on your head. He knows the word you are going to say before you say it, right?" "Yes." "So you are saying to me, that God knows all these things, He chose me, He let his Son be crucified for all your sins, he forgave all your sins, and he loves you through it all, and then you commit a sin that he already knows you were going to commit and he still sends you to Hell?"

"Uh, yes." Not a super convincing response. Chink. Chink. Chink.

I had never seen such a lively response in Nyanja after class was over. They were chatting up a storm, all together in a group, just outside the office. It was beautiful. Probably even better if I could have understood them.

On the way home, I usually take home a few pastors that live on the way. One of the pastors that thought hell was in the car. He brought up 1 Corinthians 9 about being disqualified for the prize as proof that you could end up in Hell. I gave him the illustration that if Brazil was found cheating in the world cup for taking steroids, would they still be soccer players? Yes, they would be. They just lose the rewards. That seemed to make sense to him. He was so passionate up to that point. I asked him to read Romans 6-8 before class again.

I can't wait for tomorrow. I just want these pastors so badly to know that when God said there is now no condemnation, there really isn't. And that is just the start. Tim Keller has opened my eyes to a whole new living out the gospel in the context of life. The gospel is not the A-B-C's of Christianity, but it is the A-Z's of Christianity. It doesn't just get us in the door, but the Gospel impacts every part of our life. And, it starts with living securely in the final work of Jesus (it is finished) on the cross in such a way that one badly timed decision will not result in Hell. He endured the cross for the joy set before him so we could have the joy of serving Him. We don't obey to be accepted by Him. We obey because we are accepted. And the result is a praying, church attending, worshipping, Bible reading, joy-filled relationship with the loving Creator. That is my trumpeting call over here anyways.

Part III

"See this is the irony of it all. The reality is that you don't really believe what you say you believe!" I boldly asserted, letting the words echo off the walls. The look of shock was obvious. I had singled out the four guys who said that they would go to hell for willfully sinning before they died and then told them they didn't really believe what they were passionately defending.

I continued, "If you really believed that you would go to hell, that if your last act on earth was a willful sin, then you would be living a lot different than you do right now. You would be living in fear. You would be living afraid. You would scared to do anything. You should be scared to do anything. But you are not. You live with joy. So, this is the problem. We live one way and then we preach

another. We are like Pharisees, loading up the church goes up with laws and rules and works salvation and yet you don't live like that."

My plan for that class was to talk about the gospel. I wanted scripture to convince my four friends and any other less courageous believers who didn't vote but still believed, that one badly timed decision was not going to result in eternal hell. My goal was to teach them in such a way that they could teach others. So, I taught an easy to remember four categories. GOD-MAN-CHRIST-RESPONSE. (I have learned a lot of ways to teach the gospel, but the one I got from the book "What is the Gospel? By Greg Gilbert is my favorite).

We looked at God, our creator, a holy God who has the right and authority to require holiness of his creation. The problem is that Man is willfully rebellious and sinful and has rejected God. The result of man's sin of rejecting God is eternity in hell. Jesus Christ willingly suffered a death as an atonement for all our sins so as to destroy the power of sin, death and Satan. The Father placed the sin of the world on his Son, so when God looks at His son, he sees the wretchedness of our sin, and when he looks at us, he sees the righteousness of His son. Therefore, there really is no condemnation. The punishment for the sin has already been covered. So, what do we have to do? We have to respond in faith and obedience to that message, believing that His grace is enough to cover our sin and the result is eternal life with God in heaven.

So, in essence, that was the outline that I followed. So, I started slow, just setting them up, wanting to build my case slowly and surely. I read a verse in the Christ section: **Romans 5:9 - 9** Since, therefore, we have now been justified by his blood, much more shall we be saved by him from the wrath of God.

I showed them how the original Greek grammar was broken down. The word justified means to acquit, to be made right or righteous and to be set free from the punishment that I justly do. But, I remember it best by something Stephanie once taught me: to be justified means that it is "Just As If I'ved" never sinned. I like that. The result of the cross is a life that looks like I have never sinned in the righteous eyes of God. Sure, I still sin. But, the punishment for that sin is laid on Jesus, forever, both past, present and future sins. That is what the second part of that means. It isn't just my past sins. It is my future sins as well. We shall be saved from the wrath of God. The word saved is a future tense, so it is will take place in the future and it is also a passive verb, which means it will happen to us, apart from our doing. And it is an indicative which means that it is an actual thing, not just a possibility or an idea. It's a for sure thing. So, this idea of being saved, from the wrath of God, is a verb that will take place, a promise. I will be saved from the wrath of God, but the being saved isn't something I do. It is someone else saving me. And it is something I can bank on. We are justified now and we are saved then.

I saw a lot of nodding heads. It seemed to speak directly to this issue that I can affect my eternal destination by a wrong move at the wrong time. (We are saved by grace and yet condemned by works?) The wrath of God is

notgoing to be subverted by an unrighteous act. He has already paid that price.

We also talked about [1 John 2:1-2](#) - 1My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defense-Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. 2He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.

We have one who speaks in our defense. We have a lawyer who has also paid the required punishment I deserve and whose dad is the judge. He has us covered for whatever, whenever...

So, the guys seemed shock by my comment, but they didn't respond. I moved from teacher to preacher and no one comments when the preacher is preaching. On the way home I asked one of the four pastors if he was convinced yet. He said, "Yes." And I asked him what did it. He said, "The passage in First John. That was a good one." I think that was ironic, my last verse that I shared with them all, and one verse that I hadn't planned on sharing. I wonder how it will affect him. I hope it produces in him even more joy and thankfulness. I think this is so much the issue. We don't really know how to live what we learn. And this seems to be so especially true about that gospel. Whether we believe something we don't live or don't believe something we do live, it is very difficult to get the truth from our brains to our hearts. I was referred to this great illustration by my friend Jeff Bucknam. Thought it applied so well to the struggles we see here in Zambia (and around the world, for that matter.)

Tim Keller was talking about a coke machine they have at the basement of his apartment. He would put his money in, and push the button, but nothing would happen. He learned through experience that you had to hit the side of the machine to make the money drop. Once it drops, the coke was his. He said the gospel is a lot like the coke machine. Most people believe it that way. It enters the head and yet nothing happens. They still act anxious when life gets stormy just like everyone else does. They still are barraged by fear when life is uncertain just like everyone else. They treat people with the same lack of love (sometimes worse) than everyone else. In essence, the gospel make no difference on a life. But, as Keller pointed out, if you pound the gospel in from the head until it drops to the heart, you push the buttons of life, and out comes graciousness to a co-worker instead of sarcasm, gentleness towards a unruly child or forgiveness for a spouse. We need to keep preaching the gospel to ourselves until the grace that saved us is the same grace that sanctifies us.

This week I will be doing some serious head pounding in my own life as well as the pastors. I read a great tweet this week: "Gospel proclamation to the ends of the earth tomorrow begins with Gospel proclamation to self today. Heart-Church-World.(burk_parsons)" I love preaching, but my heart better starting listening! Listen up heart, you are sinful, saved and loved!!!