

I've been given an opportunity to share a Gospel message with you this evening, a true privilege... I'm a guy who, honestly, never really enjoyed getting up in front of people to talk. Ben knows this: I dropped Speech 101 three times before I eventually had to take it as a fifth-year senior. It was either that or not graduate. I actually can't stand the sound of my own voice. My credentials as a speaker are not very impressive. And if that weren't enough, I've got enough personal baggage and skeletons in my closet to keep any good therapist busy for quite a while! But that's all old news. As I said, I have been blessed with this opportunity, and I do have better news to pass along.

### **Good**

The news I have to share is called Gospel because it's better than the news you're used to hearing. That's what "gospel" means – "good news". And it hinges on the word "good". We all have, built into us, an idea of what is good and what is bad. It's inherent in each of us, allowing us to discern and choose. We know, without anyone teaching us, what feels good and what feels bad. Ask any newborn infant... you don't even have to ask them, they communicate this dual-reality pretty well all by themselves! Good options and bad options await every person ever born. As we grow, we make good choices and bad choices. Nobody has to explain to us what makes them bad or good, the consequences reveal it to us clearly and without much doubt.

At the extremes of "bad" and "good" are the terms "evil" and "perfect" or even "holy". Lots of people may struggle with the word "holy", but you'll notice that most people don't have much of a problem grasping the concept of "evil". We've seen some bad things, and when the worst of them happen, and they're labeled "evil", you usually don't hear much of an argument, do you? When faced with

such evil, over-the-top badness, isn't it refreshing when a little "good news" brightens our day? It doesn't take much... Even the slightest bit of good in the middle of all that is bad is a relief, right? The contrast between bad and good has been compared to that of darkness and light. Even a tiny bit of light dispels the darkness.

In reality, darkness isn't even a "thing" at all. It can only be described in terms of what it is not. Same with evil. It can only be defined as a void of anything good. That's why a little bit of good news at the right time can feel really, really good!

### **Good News**

But good news, for it to be good, has to be true. News that it not true does a lot of negative things, and that's not good. Now, not all true news is necessarily good news, some of it is bad as well as true. A hurricane destroys a coastline... bad news, but true nonetheless. And, Lord knows, false news that is un-true can be considered either bad or good, depending on your perspective; we've seen plenty of that! And we know the anxiety and uncertainty that false news can bring. But all truly good news is always truthful. Agree? It can't be truly good if it's a lie. Well, are you ready to hear some truly good, absolutely truthful news? News that you can be certain of?

Certainty is the very essence of Christian faith. St. Paul writes [Romans 8:38-39], *"For I am sure – [SURE] – that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."* Paul was sure. Often times we hear people say things like, "Boy, I hope I make it to heaven." Or maybe they'll say, "Only God really knows

whether I will be with Him or not.” I can sympathize with that kind of uncertainty. Maybe you can to. The reason people ride the fence and hedge their bets on this is because of the bad things we do, or some of the things we’ve taken part in. Our sins – the bad, selfish, even downright evil thoughts and behavior that God’s Word warns us about – cause people to wonder whether God loves them, and whether they’re saved or not. The gospel good news is that Jesus death as payment for all our sins has sealed our salvation, and guarantees our acceptance, our worthiness, our righteousness. The price was high, and it’s been met!

God has given us this certainty, to know beyond all doubt that we will be with Him in eternity when we depart this life in faith. We know this, because He tells us in His word that if we had to depend on ourselves for our own salvation we could never be sure. Our salvation depends entirely on the grace of God. It is a grace which God has extended to all people, because He desires that no one should perish. It’s a grace which God has made known to us in Christ Jesus, in His life, His death, His resurrection from the dead, and in His ascension into heaven, all witnessed by actual people, with real lives, documented names, and known friends.

This is the truly good news of God’s gracious love for us in Christ Jesus. The free gift of grace gives us certainty – it’s true; certainty gives us peace, and that’s good. This truth has been handed down to us, and is now our privilege to share with you.

### **Witness**

A couple weeks ago, I was blessed to have lunch with a former student and his family, ISU class of 2010. Mike is a Captain in the United States Army, serving in the Iowa Reserves, but deployable. He’s also serving as a military Chaplain, ministering to soldiers from all walks of life. Mike told me that these men and

women face the reality of life and death – two realities, really – all the time. It’s another dual-reality that he does not have to whip up in their imaginations... it’s there. All the time. And when Capt. Mike, the Chaplain, asks them, “What’s going to happen to you when you die?”, it’s not an awkward question as you might think. He said that it is usually a question they have already given a lot thought to. And oftentimes it opens up a sincere, honest dialog that opens a door and enables counseling to go a little deeper.

Here, in our more comfortable existence, we are perhaps somewhat insulated from that kind of constant existential awareness. Here, it’s easy to get wrapped-up in life, in classes and jobs, in leisure and diversions – the culture. And yes, sometimes this life gets messy, but you find a way to cope and you move on, right? But occasionally, we are confronted with the same existential truth of the second reality, and death sneaks in. When it does, we can’t hide from it. You may have felt this gut-punch of reality – like those soldiers – only maybe with a little less of the frequency or urgency of it that they feel all the time.

Nevertheless, it hits us hard, and causes us to wonder... What’s going to happen to you when you die? Now, don’t get distracted by my question, I’m not asking, philosophically, “What’s going to happen to *us* when *we* die” – YOU? What will happen to you? And, as I mentioned before, I’m certain that there are not just one but two realities at work in this as well. The first reality is constrained by time and ruled by the things God created to mark the time... the sun, the moon, the heavens and seasons. From this earthly existential perspective, decay and the processes of death are rather predictable and explainable... we’ve all watched TV shows like “Bones”, or some other forensic science documentary that describes the process of death – we know what happens. It will appear that life has left me when I die. It

will appear that the only thing left behind is an empty shell, one that time and the process of nature will eventually destroy. Ashes to ashes; dust to dust. And all I ever possessed will belong to someone else.

The other reality is one where time is not a factor, and never was a factor! An existential reality with no such earthly constraints; one that is centered on the presence of Christ, our Savior and Creator, Redeemer and Judge. There, in this eternal reality, I will live with Him, in His presence, in a brand-new, uncorruptible, indestructible body, a body that is everything God intended it to be, only without all the accumulated pollutants that generations of sin had ravaged. I'm certain of this. I am just as certain of this eternal reality as I am of this earthly reality. But I know that in eternity I will possess all the blessings Christ has won for me. Nothing of eternal value will be lost that is not gained a thousand-fold!

While I live and persevere in the present-day reality, as Jesus Himself once did, and as I struggle in this life, He has graciously sent His Holy Spirit to keep me connected to the other eternal reality. And until that time when time will end for me, I will praise Him for all His blessings, and proclaim what He has done, so that you will know that this could be yours as well. This gift is yours, not to win or earn... it's simply yours to receive. It has been giftwrapped by Christ Himself, and it has your name on it. And to receive it only takes you simply facing the reality of evil in our world, our on-going problem with sin – including your sin – and handing it all over to our Lord and our Redeemer. Embrace the reality and the certainty of goodness, purity, and holiness in Christ Jesus!

He has conquered that sin by overcoming everything you have ever faced. He's conquered death by rising from the dead. And He conveys those victories to you

by His promise! You have this gift! It's been given. It's yours, only to receive. And there's nothing in this world, or in the Judgment to come that can condemn us, because Jesus has completely cleansed us from all sin and corruption!

### **Tangible Believers**

Believers come in all shapes and sizes. We come from all walks of life and all cultures. We all have experienced the earthly realities, and have seen how it has all been corrupted and ravaged over time. We all know, in varying degrees, the earthly realities of life and death. For some, that's all there is. But believers who have received God's Good News now know the realities of Life and Everlasting Life! We have given up on the false dichotomy of life and the finality of life, and instead have embraced Christ's victorious life and death and resurrection!

This is the truth of the Gospel! It is most certainly true! The truly good Good News of God's gracious love for us in Christ Jesus. God's grace gives us certainty; certainty gives us peace. And in peaceful faith, we hold onto the hope that has been placed in us. God's Holy Spirit keeps us in that faith, until life everlasting! This gift has been handed down to us, and is now ours to share with you. You can be certain that "*neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate YOU from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord*". My prayer is that you will unwrap this gift and claim it as your own. May you come to know your Lord and your Savior from the curse of sin, Jesus Christ, that you may be blessed with the assurance of His victory and your salvation in Him.

Rev. Wm. Jensen