

## The Simplicity of the Gospel

*by Linda Rex*

**October 8, 2023, Proper 22 / After Pentecost**—Recently I was given the privilege of participating in a writing project which found me immersed in studies, prayer, and the Word of God. As I dove deep, I was grateful for the benefit of the education I have received over the years, specifically my current journey with Grace Communion Seminary.

The passage for this Sunday, Philippians 3:4b–14, was a good reminder that no matter how blessed I may be and no matter how educated or spiritually grounded I become, it is of little value in comparison with personally knowing my Lord Jesus Christ. Over the years I have come up against this over and over, as though our Father wants to remind us constantly of what really matters in this life. Indeed, Jesus himself told us to seek his kingdom first, and all the other would be added (Matt. 6:33)—and Jesus is the kingdom of God present in and with us by his Holy Spirit (Lk. 17:20-21).

Have you ever lost anything that you valued more than anything in the world? I know I have. Over the years, I have lost friends, family members, jobs, and at one point I even lost my marriage, though God was gracious and eventually restored it. What I gained in the midst of all those losses, though, is what, as I discovered over the years, is of greatest and most lasting value—a deeper, closer walk with Jesus and the Spirit, and a clearer understanding of who God is, how much he loves you and me, and what really matters in this life. I learned things about myself I never knew before—some things which required repentance, some things which surprised me, and some things which enabled me to realize God’s generosity, mercy, and love.

This brings to mind the old story in the book of Genesis, where Lot and his family are escaping the imminent destruction of their home. They are told by the angels not to look back. But Lot’s wife does look back at one point, and ends up a pillar of salt. I’ve often wondered what exactly made her look back (Gen. 19:17, 26). Was she missing friends, family, or the luxuries of city life? Recently, we were reminded of the stories which came out of the events of 9/11, where people were needing to leave the building after the planes hit and before the buildings fell. At that moment, they had a choice. They could go back and get what they left behind—a purse, a computer, a briefcase—or they could leave it behind and escape. So many of those who went back to get their belongings did not survive, while many of those who immediately left did.

I’m not saying there was sin either way. I’m simply using it as an example of what can happen when we get our priorities out of order. It’s possible to get our priorities out of order even when we are serving God. When getting the next church project done or the next sermon written, or the next Christmas box made, or the next box of donated items filled becomes more important than having a quiet conversation with our Lord, we have allowed our priorities to go awry. We can so easily trade in the righteousness which is ours by faith in Christ for a righteousness based on what we do, who we serve, what church we attend, or what book or Bible we read.

The apostle Paul brings it down to the nitty-gritty, down to the simplicity of the gospel. We share in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We can know and be known by our Lord Jesus Christ. He has given us his Spirit so we can share in his own face-to-face relationship with our heavenly Father. There is nothing more valuable or lasting than this.

Our daily walk in the Spirit by faith in Christ is what gives us the fortitude, the grace, and the love we need each moment. Our ministry, whatever it may be, is empty apart from the presence of the indwelling Christ by the Spirit. Our service to God and others may be great and be helpful, but it needs the empowerment of God’s Spirit in order for it to have eternal and lasting value. We need our Lord Jesus living in us and moving through us by his Spirit in order to make our

everyday lives be more than drudgery or routine, and to be able to endure the suffering and struggle that comes with following Christ. When we do life in the Spirit, it becomes an adventurous journey with our Lord and our Father, where wonderful things can happen, lives can be transformed and healed, suffering and pain can be endured and overcome, and God's kingdom be realized even now in human hearts and lives.

*Dear Father, thank you for your love and grace, and your personal presence in and with us through Jesus and by your Spirit. May we be reminded this day to seek you and your kingdom first, and allow you to take care of the rest, through Jesus our Lord and by your Spirit. Amen.*

*"If anyone else has a mind to put confidence in the flesh, I far more: circumcised the eighth day, of the nation of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; as to the Law, a Pharisee; as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to the righteousness which is in the Law, found blameless. But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ, and may be found in Him, not having a righteousness of my own derived from the Law, but that which is through faith in Christ, the righteousness which comes from God on the basis of faith, that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings, being conformed to His death; in order that I may attain to the resurrection from the dead. Not that I have already obtained it or have already become perfect, but I press on so that I may lay hold of that for which also I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus. Brethren, I do not regard myself as having laid hold of it yet; but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus."* Philippians 3:4b–14 NASB

*" 'Listen to another parable. There was a landowner who 'planted a vineyard and put a wall around it and dug a wine press in it, and built a tower,' and rented it out to vine-growers and went on a journey. When the harvest time approached, he sent his slaves to the vine-growers to receive his produce. The vine-growers took his slaves and beat one, and killed another, and stoned a third. Again he sent another group of slaves larger than the first; and they did the same thing to them. But afterward he sent his son to them, saying, "They will respect my son." But when the vine-growers saw the son, they said among themselves, "This is the heir; come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance." They took him, and threw him out of the vineyard and killed him. Therefore when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vine-growers?' They said to Him, 'He will bring those wretches to a wretched end, and will rent out the vineyard to other vine-growers who will pay him the proceeds at the proper seasons.' Jesus said to them, 'Did you never read in the Scriptures, " 'The stone which the builders rejected, this became the chief corner' stone; 'this came about from the Lord, and it is marvelous in our eyes'"? Therefore I say to you, the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people, producing the fruit of it. And he who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces; but on whomever it falls, it will scatter him like dust.' When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard His parables, they understood that He was speaking about them. When they sought to seize Him, they feared the people, because they considered Him to be a prophet.' "* Matthew 21:33–46 NASB