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R. C. SPROUL

What Is the Great Commission?

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Chapter One

What Is the Gospel?

The battle between the Persian army of Darius I and the troops of Greece that took place at Marathon in 490 BC was a watershed moment in the Greco-Persian Wars and in the history of Western society. Until that point, Darius had not been defeated in his quest to conquer Greece, and Persian dominance across the Mediterranean region had grown steadily for more than one hundred and fifty years. The defeat of the superior Persian forces by the Greek army at Marathon ushered in the two-hundred-year

influence of Classical Greek culture and the decline of the Medo-Persian Empire.

This was a hugely important battle—yet the people back home had no idea of the outcome in the battle’s immediate aftermath. They had to wait anxiously to get some word of what had happened. But today, in most cases, we don’t have to wait very long for updates on significant events. We live in a world where news travels very rapidly, with sophisticated technology to announce what is going on around the globe in a matter of moments. In the ancient world, though, it was not like that. A battle of strategic importance for the history of the nation may have been taking place two thousand miles away, and it would certainly have taken some time for reports to travel so far.

Armies in the ancient world used runners to carry word about the outcome of battles. The people at home would post lookouts to watch for some sign of a messenger. It’s said that the watchman could tell by the bearing of the runner whether he was coming with good news or bad.

One of the enduring legacies of the Battle of Marathon is as the inspiration of the marathon-length race. The legend is that a runner brought news of the Athenian victory to the city of Athens and dropped dead from exhaustion

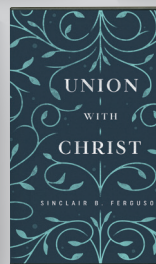
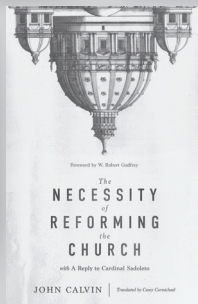
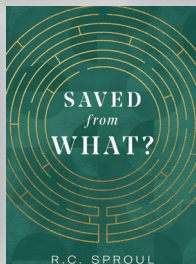
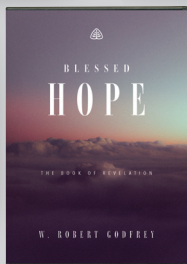
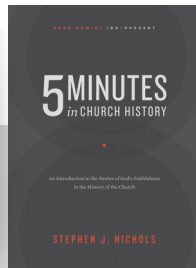
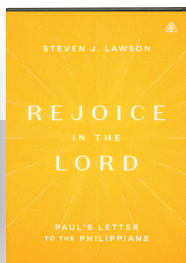
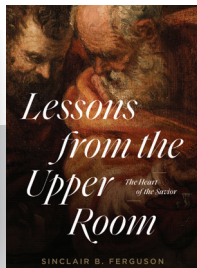
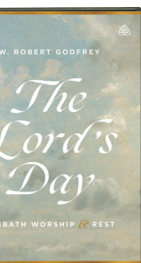
What Is the Gospel?

after he arrived. He pushed himself to the absolute limit because he was bearing good news, and he wanted the people to be able to rejoice in it.

The Apostle Paul alluded to these practices in his epistle to the Romans, where he said, “How beautiful are the feet of those who preach the good news!” (10:15). Picture how the watchman could see the feet flying as the runner rushed to the city gates to bring good news. It was a beautiful sight, and the people would shout celebrations of victory at the sight of him. They had a word for that kind of a message: it was a *euangelion*, a good message—a *gospel*.

The word *gospel* derives from the Old English *godspell*, meaning “good story” or “good message.” *Godspell* translates the Latin *evangelium*, which is derived from the Greek *euangelion*. The Greek word is made up of the prefix *eu-* and the root *angelion*. The prefix *eu-* is found frequently in the English language and refers to something “good.” Take the word *euphemism*, for example. A dentist about to drill might say, “This may cause a bit of discomfort,” rather than, “This is going to hurt.” He uses softer words to take the edge off something that is difficult for us to hear. That’s a euphemism: stating something in better terms than it actually is. Likewise, at a funeral, when a minister stands

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