

## **2. The Gospel: Of First Importance**

Goals:

- 1) help everyone understand and be able to clearly define the gospel
- 2) help establish the gospel's priority in life and its centrality in the Biblical narrative
- 3) help everyone gain appreciation for the supernatural versatility of the gospel to adequately address all of life's issues, problems, questions, etc.

### **2.1 God's Story and the Good News of Jesus Christ**

In our first class, we briefly covered the plotline of the Biblical narrative (Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration). In this class, I want to stress that the redemptive work of Christ is the ultimate focus and climax of the biblical story. It's not just another point in the plotline; it's the main point. In other words, the storyline of the Bible focuses on and finds its fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ (anticipated, accomplished, and applied).

If we don't see that the good news of Jesus Christ is the main theme or subject that ties all the Scriptures together, we'll be in danger of losing the forest for the trees and drifting off of the Biblical message down religious rabbit trails and spiritual dead ends.

Let me try to show that God's story is all about the good news of Jesus Christ by looking at some Scriptures that make this point explicitly.

**John 5:39** *You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.*

**2 Timothy 3:14-15** *But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.*

**Romans 1:1-4** *Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord . . .*

**Hebrews 1:1-2** *Long ago, at many times and in various ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son . . .*

**Luke 24:25-27, 32, 44-47** *And he said to them, 'O foolish ones, and slow of heart to*

*believe all that the prophets have spoken! Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory? And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself. . . . (v. 32) They said to each other, 'Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the Scriptures? . . . (vv. 44-47) Then he said to them, 'These are my words that I spoke to you while I was still with you, that everything written about me in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.' Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, 'Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem.*

### **Matthew 1:1-17**

**1 Corinthians 15:1-5** *Now I would remind you brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain.*

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.*

“Jesus is the message—God participating in human life, coming near to us, bringing his good news, expressing God’s love for us, dying as our substitute, rising as the victor over death, and building his church as a community of grace. Jesus is not just the main person in one of many events in the story of God’s people. Jesus is the final revelation in God’s drama of redemption. Humanity sees God in full light in Jesus. Jesus is God’s ultimate word about human life and the Bible is God’s word about God’s self-revelation through human life.” - Justin Holcomb

“ . . . the entirety of our faith is about Jesus. God’s grand, redemptive story begins with a foretelling of the coming Seed [Genesis 3:15]. His chosen servants foreshadow His mission. His prophets herald His arrival. As history progresses onward, we begin to see the entirety of God’s revelation to humanity as pointing towards the advent of the Messiah. This is perhaps why Paul says, ‘All the promises of God find their Yes in Him’ (**2 Cor 1:20**).” - Chris Tomlinson

### **Why am I emphasizing this point so much?**

We’ve got to realize that the Bible is *not about us*; it’s about Jesus!

Only as we are united to Him through faith (active and ongoing) can we find our proper place in the Biblical story and begin to really figure out how it applies to our lives. [Jesus is much more than a moral example]. It is only through the new identity we have as a

result of our faith union with Jesus Christ that we find grace to live out the new life we have in Him (**Galatians 2:20**). It's exceedingly dangerous to understand and apply the Scriptures any other way (**2 Peter 3:14-18; Colossians 2:16-23** contrasted with **Colossians 3:1-17**).

"The basic conflict in theology is between a theocentric theology and an anthropocentric theology - a God-centered theology or a man-centered theology. I'm afraid that many professing Christians are much more concerned about the exaltation of human beings than they are about the dignity of God Himself." R.C. Sproul

Functionally, a man-centered, or anthropocentric, theology quickly morphs into a self-centered theology (psychology). Everything in our experience and in our culture helps to promote and reinforce our deep seated self-centeredness.

"Here is just one example of the total wrongness of something I tend to be automatically sure of: everything in my own immediate experience supports my deep belief that I am the absolute center of the universe; the realist, most vivid and important person in existence. We rarely think about this sort of natural, basic self-centeredness because it's so socially repulsive. But it's pretty much the same for all of us. It is our default setting, hard-wired into our boards at birth. Think about it: there is no experience you have had that you are not the absolute center of. The world as you experience it is there in front of YOU or behind YOU, to the left or right of YOU, on YOUR TV or YOUR monitor. And so on. Other people's thoughts and feelings have to be communicated to you somehow, but your own are so immediate, urgent, real." - David Foster Wallace (2005 Commencement address at Kenyon College)

Making the paradigm-shift from self-centeredness to God-centeredness is the spiritual equivalent of the Copernican Revolution in science (Ptolemaic model centered on the earth → Heliocentric model.)

We must read our Bibles in order to see how it relates to Jesus before we consider how it relates to us. This necessarily involves us learning about how the person and work of Jesus fulfill the main "themes" that run through the Scriptures

All the Biblical promises, covenants, and themes look forward to and find their fulfillment in the person and work of Christ →

- the presence of God
- the kingdom of God
- kingship
- priesthood/sacrificial system
- image of God
- tabernacle/temple (see: the presence of God)
- worship/idolatry

- covenant
- obedience/disobedience
- blessing/curse
- home/place/exile/restoration
- rest
- work/stewardship
- marriage
- family/father/son
- friendship
- shame/honor
- suffering/death/
- futility/fruitfulness
- bondage/freedom

“This is what we should seek in the whole of Scripture: truly to know Jesus Christ, and the infinite riches that are comprised in him and are offered to us by him from God the Father. If one were to sift thoroughly the Law and the Prophets, he would not find a single word which would not draw and bring us to him. . . . Therefore, rightly does Saint Paul say . . . that he would know nothing except Jesus Christ, and him crucified.” - John Calvin

## 2.2 What is the Gospel (Good News)?

OK, if the Biblical story is all about the good news (Gospel) of Jesus Christ, what is the Gospel anyway?

### **Biblical summaries of the Gospel**

**Isaiah 53:5** *But He was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon Him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with His wounds we are healed.*

**Mark 10:45** *For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give His life as a ransom for many.*

**John 3:16** *For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life.*

**Acts 13:38-39** *Let it be known to you therefore, brothers, that through this man forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you, and by Him everyone who believes is freed from everything from which you could not be freed by the law of Moses.*

**Romans 4:25** *[Jesus] was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.*

**Romans 5:5** . . . *at the right time Christ died for the ungodly.*

**Romans 5:8** *God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us . . .*

**Romans 5:10** . . . *while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son*

**1 Corinthians 15:3-5** *For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.*

**2 Corinthians 5:19** . . . *in Christ God was reconciling the world to Himself, not counting their trespasses against them . . .*

**2 Corinthians 5:21** *For our sake He made Him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in Him we might become the righteousness of God.*

**Galatians 1:3-4** . . . *the Lord Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for our sins to deliver us from the present evil age, according to the will of our God and Father . . .*

**Galatians 3:13** *Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us -- for it is written, 'Cursed is everyone who is hanged on a tree' . . .*

**Galatians 4:4-5** *But when the fullness of time had come, God sent forth His Son, born of woman, born under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons.*

**Ephesians 1:7** *In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace . . .*

**Ephesians 2:13** *But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

**Ephesians 5:2** *Christ loved us and gave Himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.*

**Philippians 2:8-11** *And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

**Colossians 1:19-20** *For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through*

*Him to reconcile to Himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.*

**Colossians 1:21-22** *And you, who once were alienated and hostile in mind, doing evil deeds, He has now reconciled in His body of flesh by His death, in order to present you holy and blameless and above reproach before Him . . .*

**1 Timothy 1:15** *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.*

**Titus 2:14** *[Jesus Christ] gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession who are zealous for good works.*

**Hebrews 9:28** *So Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for Him.*

**Hebrews 13:12** *Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through His own blood.*

**1 Peter 2:24** *He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree, that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By His wounds you have been healed.*

**1 Peter 3:18** *For Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, that He might bring us to God . . .*

**1 John 4:10** *In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.*

We've seen that there are many summaries of the Gospel in Scripture. The content of the Gospel is always the same [similar], but the variety of ways it can be faithfully stated is truly remarkable. One reason for this variety is the fact that the Gospel is not being merely summarized as some sort of proposition; rather, the Gospel message is being applied to a wide variety of situations and contexts. This is what Timothy Keller calls the "supernatural versatility" of the Gospel.

We need to know the Gospel in such a way that we can see and summarize how it shines the light of God's love and grace into an endless variety of dark and difficult situations.

### **Other summaries of the Gospel**

How well do we know the Good News of Jesus Christ?

Illustration: Ligonier Ministries asking over a hundred people at a Christian Booksellers Convention: "What is the Gospel?" Only a few people could provide adequate, biblically-

informed, answers to that question.

How would you answer the question, "What is the Gospel?"

John Piper gives a great one sentence summary of the Gospel: "The Son of God expressing the love of God to save us from the wrath of God so we could enjoy the presence of God." This summary takes about three seconds to say, but it covers key Biblical themes that can be "unpacked" for hours.

That's another important question: Even if we are able to summarize the Good News in a sentence or two, are we able to bring up the glorious riches that lie untapped in its depths?; or, does our Gospel summary sort of "sit on the surface" of what we are thinking and saying, never really coming into contact with the triumphs and troubles, sins and successes of everyday "real life." In other words, do our Gospel 'summaries' amount to all we know about the Gospel?

"That the greatest good (God) offers the greatest action (love) to the greatest need (wrath-owed sinners) by sending the greatest treasure (Jesus) in the greatest invitation (to everyone) into the greatest life (everlasting)." - Jared Wilson

Three basic elements of the good news: "the identity of Jesus as Son of God and Messiah, the death of Jesus for sin and justification, and the establishment of the reign of God and the new creation." - Simon Gathercole, quoted by Timothy Keller, Center Church, 33

incarnation (John 1:14), substitution (2 Corinthians 5:21), resurrection (Romans 4:24-25), restoration (Ephesians 1:9-10)

"Jesus Christ lived a perfect life -- the only human being to ever do so (Heb. 4:15). At the end of his life, he deserved blessing and acceptance; at the end of our lives, because every one of us lives in sin, we deserve rejection and condemnation (Rom. 3:9-10). Yet when the time had fully come, Jesus received in our place, on the cross, the rejection and condemnation we deserve (1 Pet. 3:18), so that, when we believe in him, we can receive the blessing and acceptance he deserves (2 Cor. 5:21)." - Timothy Keller, Center Church, 35

"The gospel tells us that our Creator has become our Redeemer. It announces that the Son of God has become man 'for us men and for our salvation' and has died on the cross to save us from eternal judgment. The basic description of the saving death of Christ in the Bible is as a propitiation, that is, as that which quenched God's wrath against us by obliterating our sins from his sight. God's wrath is his righteousness reacting against unrighteousness; it shows itself in retributive justice. But Jesus Christ has shielded us from the nightmare prospect of retributive justice by becoming our representative

substitute, in obedience to his Father's will, and receiving the wages of our sin in our place.

By this means justice has been done, for the sins of all that will ever be pardoned were judged and punished in the person of God the Son, and it is on this basis that pardon is now offered to us offenders. Redeeming love and retributive justice joined hands, so to speak, at Calvary, for there God showed himself to be 'just, and the justifier of him that hath faith in Jesus.'

Do you understand this? If you do, you are now seeing to the very heart of the Christian gospel. No version of that message goes deeper than that which declares man's root problem before God to be his sin, which evokes wrath, and God's basic provision for man to be propitiation, which out of wrath brings peace. Some versions of the gospel, indeed, are open to blame because they never get down to this level." - J. I. Packer and Mark Dever

"We have all heard the gospel presented as God's triumphant answer to human problems - problems of our relation with ourselves and our fellow humans and our environment. Well, there is no doubt that the gospel does bring us solutions to these problems, but it does so by first solving a deeper problem - the deepest of all human problems, the problem of man's relation with his Maker. And unless we make it plain that the solution of these former problems depends on the settling of this latter one, we are misrepresenting the message and becoming false witnesses of God - for a half-truth presented as if it were the whole truth becomes something of a falsehood by that very fact. No reader of the New Testament can miss the fact that it knows all about our human problems - fear, moral cowardice, illness of body and mind, loneliness, insecurity, hopelessness, despair, cruelty, abuse of power, and the rest - but equally no reader of the New Testament can miss the fact that it resolves all these problems, one way or another, into the fundamental problem of sin against God." - J. I. Packer and Mark Dever

"This Gospel . . . is that God is our holy Creator and righteous Judge. He created us to glorify Him and enjoy Him forever, but we have all sinned, both in Adam as our representative head, and in our own individual action (Rom. 5:12; 3:23). We therefore deserve death - spiritual separation from God in hell (Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:3) - and are in fact already spiritually stillborn, helpless in our sins (Ps. 51:5; Rom. 5:6-8; Eph. 2:1) and in need of God to impart spiritual life to us (Ezek. 37:1-13; John 3:3). But God sent His Son Jesus Christ, fully God and fully man (Phil. 2:5-11), to die the death that we deserved, and He raised Him up for our justification, proving that He was God's Son (Rom. 5:1; 1:4). If we would have Christ's perfect righteousness credited to us, and the penalty for our sins accounted to Him, we must repent of our sins and believe in Jesus Christ for salvation (2 Cor. 5:21; Mark 1:14-15). - Mark Dever

"The gospel is good news, not good advice. The gospel is not primarily a way of life. It is not something we do, but something that has been done for us and something we must respond to." Timothy Keller, Center Church, 29



Redemption is *ab extra* (“from without”) and not *ex nos* (“from [within] us”). The Gospel is Good News because it tells us who Christ is and what He has done for our salvation *apart from us*. All that has been done for our redemption took place two millennia ago through the birth, life, suffering, death, resurrection, and ascension of the Son of God.

All these summaries of the Good News presuppose that there is bad news. Salvation implies that there is something we need to be saved *from*.

R. C. Sproul tells the story of an enthusiastic believer going up to people and asking, “Are you saved?” When he came to Sproul (not knowing who he was) and asked his question, he was stopped in his tracks when R. C. responded by asking him, “Saved from what?”

All the important doctrines of Scripture have faced severe attack over the millennia. In our day, there are many who are promoting a “non-violent” view of the atonement. This is ultimately rooted in a failure and/or an unwillingness to reckon with the seriousness of sin and evil on the one hand and the holiness and justice of God on the other hand.

“All inadequate doctrines of the atonement are due to inadequate doctrines of God and man. If we bring God down to our level and raise ourselves to his, then of course we see no need for a radical salvation, let alone for a radical salvation to secure it. When, on the other hand, we have glimpsed the blinding glory of the holiness of God, and have been so convicted of our sin by the Holy Spirit that we tremble before God and acknowledge what we are, namely ‘hell-deserving sinners’, then and only then does the necessity of the cross appear so obvious that we are astonished we never saw it before.” - John Stott, [The Cross of Christ](#), 109

“The cross can be seen as proof of God’s love only when it is at the same time seen as a proof of his justice.” John Stott, [The Cross of Christ](#), 221

Until we grasp how much God was against us in our sin, we will not be able to appreciate how much He is for us and with us in Christ.

“When we rightly identify the source of our problem, we are on our way to a solution that celebrates the grace of Christ. But we must first acknowledge that the problem is us! It is inside us, deep in the recesses of our hearts....But if we don’t face our own sins, we will never get to the real solution. We will minimize the redeeming love of Father, Son, and Spirit or bypass it completely. This is deadly. There is nothing more serious! The Bible says that my real problem is not psychological (low self-esteem or unmet needs), social (bad relationship and influences, but my real problem is spiritual (my

straying heart and my need for Christ). I have replaced Christ with something else, and as a consequence, my heart is hopeless and powerless. Its responses reflect its bondage to whatever it is serving instead of Christ. Ultimately my real problem is a worship disorder.” Lane and Tripp

“First the bad news: God is your judge, and you have sinned against him. And then the gospel: but Jesus has died so that sinners may be forgiven of their sins if they will repent and believe in Him.” Greg Gilbert

“Being able to articulate the gospel with accuracy is one thing; having its truth captivate your soul is quite another. . . . The gospel is not just supposed to be our ticket into heaven; it is to be an entirely new basis for how we relate to God, ourselves, and others.” J. D. Greer, Gospel, 9

### **2.3 There is Only One Gospel**

The Gospel is unique and exclusive. This grates against the pluralism (relativism) and “tolerance” (hard-core permissiveness which is intolerant toward those who disagree with relativism).

no other gospel; the gospel is unique (Gal 1:6)

every counter narrative has its own “good news”

Not everything that claims to be the gospel is the gospel

exclusivity of the gospel (Acts 4:12; John 14:6)

### **2.4 The Gospel Affects Everything**

Many of us don’t really believe that the Gospel affects everything. We think that the Gospel has served its purpose once we are “saved.” We think of the Gospel as the ABCs of the Christian life and soon after “conversion” lay it aside in order to move on to “bigger and better” (and seemingly more interesting) things.

“We don’t graduate from the gospel. We hold true to it. And the gospel alone propels us out and empowers us to press on. Grace-driven effort is effort that flows from the joys and wonders of worship, flowing from beholding the amazing gospel of God’s grace.” –D.A. Carson

The Gospel is functionally inert for too many of us. We don’t know how to take our faith in

Christ out for a walk in the real world and we don't know how to bring our hope in Christ with us as we deal with the issues of our soul.

"God did not give us His gospel just so we could embrace it and be converted. Actually, He offers it to us every day as a gift that keeps on giving to us everything we need for life and godliness. The wise believer learns this truth early and becomes proficient in extracting available benefits from the gospel each day. We extract these benefits by being absorbed in the gospel, preaching it to ourselves when necessary, and by daring to reckon it true in all we do

God's gifts are all of grace, and there is nothing we can do to earn them. However, the wise believer will make sure he is positioning himself in the spot where God's gracious gifts are located. And the Scripture teaches that all such gifts are located inside the gospel. Hence, the Bible tells Christians to be continuously established and steadfast in the gospel and to refuse to be moved from there (Colossians 1:23)." - Milton Vincent, A Gospel Primer for Christians, 5

"The gospel shows us that our spiritual problem lies not only in failing to obey God, but also in relying on our obedience to make us fully acceptable to God, ourselves and others. Every kind of character flaw comes from this natural impulse to be our own savior through our performance and achievement. On the one hand, proud and disdainful personalities come from basing your identity on your performance and thinking you are succeeding. But on the other hand, discouraged and self-loathing personalities also come from basing your identity on your performance and thinking you are failing.

Belief in the gospel is not just the way to enter the kingdom of God; it is the way to address every obstacle and grow in every aspect. The gospel is not just the "ABCs" but the "A-to-Z" of the Christian life. The gospel is the way that anything is renewed and transformed by Christ — whether a heart, a relationship, a church, or a community. All our problems come from a lack of orientation to the gospel. Put positively, the gospel transforms our hearts, our thinking and our approach to absolutely everything." - Tim Keller - Paul's Letter to the Galatians (Leaders guide), p. 2

## **The Gospel gap (Gal 2)**

a simple but not simplistic message - *"I would not give a fig for simplicity on this side of complexity, but I would give my life for simplicity on the other side of complexity."* Oliver Wendell Holmes

Gospel → Gospel truths → Gospel conduct

sex, money, suffering, relationships, marriage, parenting, priorities, work, criticism,

functional centrality of the gospel in our lives (Gal 2)

cosmic and comprehensive scope of the gospel

the "supernatural versatility" of the gospel

See "The Cross Chart" in World Harvest Mission's Gospel Growth book, p. 19

whatever spiritual dysfunction we face, the cure is found in the good news of Jesus Christ