

What is the Gospel?

Defining the Term

Before diving into the specifics and complexities of the gospel message, let's start by defining it using simple terms. The term itself, *gospel*, means "good news." When one speaks of the gospel of Jesus Christ, they are quite literally talking about the good news that was delivered through the person and work of Christ. The Christian gospel is considered good news because it proclaims how wayward sinners can be reconciled back to God.

The Uniqueness of the Gospel

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a *unique* message. It is important that we see, understand, and convey the uniqueness of the gospel compared to other religious messages. The truth it conveys sets Christianity apart from all world religions and spiritualities. The world's major religions focus on what humanity can *do* to be reconciled to God, while the Christian gospel focuses on what Christ has *done*.

Additionally, the gospel is unique in the sense that it offers assurance of reconciliation to God, whereas most other faith systems offer no such assurance. The uniqueness of the gospel is what makes Christianity so compelling to the hearts of humanity.

The Whole Story

The message of the gospel can be divided into four parts: (1) creation, (2) fall, (3) redemption, and (4) restoration. In fact, the entire storyline of the Bible follows and fits into the same pattern. This means that the gospel message is not an obscure idea tucked away in one of the Bible's sixty-six books. *All* of Scripture points to the good news of Jesus Christ. Each and every book echoes the message of hope Jesus preached during His earthly ministry. When viewing Scripture as a complete message, we see that the gospel emerges as the central truth God wants to convey to His creation.

Creation. The gospel starts with the understanding that human life is significant; each person who enters the world bears the image of God¹. This makes human life extremely valuable and sacred. As God's image-bearers, we are capable of hearing and responding to God. In other words, we are able to have a *relationship* with our Creator². We see this clearly portrayed by our first parents—Adam and Eve. The opening chapters of Genesis³ details their creation and fellowship with God. When looking at all that He had created, especially man and woman, God declares it to be "very good⁴." This is to say that the world God created, like Himself, was *perfect*. Adam and Eve enjoyed, however briefly, this perfection. They enjoyed God's presence, submitting to Him as their Creator, as He cared for and provided all they had need of. Every human is designed to have this type of relationship with their Creator.

¹ Genesis 1:27

² Genesis 1:28-30

³ Genesis 1-3

⁴ Genesis 1:31

The purpose for our existence is to value this relationship more than anything else; to worship God and God alone. By doing so, we display the holiness, worth, and importance of the God who created us. Scripture calls this *bringing God glory*. Because God is perfect, holy, and just, He is capable of receiving all worship and glory. He is the most important, glorious, powerful, loving, holy, and wise person that exists or will exist. So, not only is He capable of receiving all worship and glory, He is *deserving* of it as well.

Fall. The gospel of Jesus Christ is *good news*. But for news to be considered good, there must be something we consider to be *bad*. Furthermore, how *bad* the bad news is helps determine how *good* the good news is. And it is not an overstatement to say that the gospel is not only good news, but that it is the *best news*. This implies that the bad news contained in the gospel message is extremely tragic—something so serious and disheartening that many do not like to spend time thinking about it or hearing someone address it.

Although we were created to live lives of joyful submission to God, bringing Him glory as we worship him alone, humanity has rejected their created purpose for existence. We do not need to look any further for the source of the world's brokenness—humanity's rejection of God provides us with the answer. As we take a closer look at the bad news, it is helpful to return to the narrative of Adam and Eve.

Adam and Eve were created by God and placed to live in a perfect garden called Eden. Eden was absent of the suffering and devastation that is so prevalent in the world today. They experienced a glorious freedom to enjoy all that God had created. God revealed himself to be a loving Father and close friend. He gave our first parents only one restriction—do not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil⁵. This shows that submission to God is necessary for the human soul to flourish and experience complete satisfaction. Bible scholars agree that the term the *tree of the knowledge of good and evil* represents something far more than just a command restricting Adam and Eve from eating fruit from a specific tree. The term communicates the necessity for Adam and Eve to refrain from elevating themselves to God's place. It refers to the ability to determine truth, moral uprightness, and holy conduct. Adam and Eve were being instructed to leave those decisions to a perfect, holy, and loving God. Let God rule as God and enjoy all that He had created.

Creation was thrown into chaos by the appearance of the Serpent, who we know as Satan⁶. He speaks only twice⁷, but that is enough to plant seeds of doubt in Adam and Eve's mind concerning the character and nature of God. Satan's statements directly contradict the words of God and theme of the first two chapters of Genesis. In Genesis 1-2, God shows He will provide all good things, especially His presence, for human beings if they will only trust and obey Him. Satan shows up and implies that God is keeping good from his creation rather than providing it. He seeks to deceive Adam and Eve into thinking that God is denying them true joy and freedom. Although they were already like God from being created in His image, Satan tempted them to act as their own gods in an effort to become like God. When faced with the decision of trusting God or her own judgment, Eve chose to disobey God. Rather than protect his helpmate in her moment of temptation, Adam soon joins in her rebellion. This brought immediate brokenness to their relationship with God and each other. Now their nakedness was accompanied by guilt and shame, blessing was replaced by eternal punishment, and fear took the place of trust. Rather than run to God and enjoy communing with Him, Adam and Eve chose to run from Him.

What takes place in Genesis 3 is referred to as the *original sin*. This act introduced a brokenness into the souls of humanity and our world. Every disappointment, heartache, act of evil, and all selfishness can be traced back to

⁵ Genesis 2:15-17

⁶ Revelation 12:9

⁷ Genesis 3:1-5

Genesis 3. Sin and its' effects have been passed down from generation to generation⁸. Theologians call this *imputed sin*—meaning every human is, both by nature and action, a sinner who experiences the same brokenness and separation from God that Adam and Eve did subsequent to their sin and rebellion. Although every person retains the image of God, sin affects all parts of our humanity. Sin is described in many ways throughout the Bible⁹ and the world feels the effects of each definition.

In response to humanity's rebellion, God curses the world¹⁰, including his most-valued creation—mankind. Because God is just and fair, He must punish sin. The Bible teaches that the result of sin is death¹¹. The belittling of God and His glory, the mockery of truth that humanity commits as they choose to live as their own gods, and our choice to worship creation rather than the Creator, all bring both spiritual and physical death. The righteous wrath of God is what every human deserves and is what every human will receive¹². And because we are made in the image of God, we are *eternal* beings. This means that the punishment for our sin will last forever. Upon our physical deaths, we will experience an eternal separation from God, most commonly referred to as *hell*. Hell is eternal and conscious punishment. Although we can only speculate what it will look and feel like based on what is said about it in the Scriptures, we can firmly state that it is not a joyful place to spend eternity.

Humanity's situation is bleak; the bad news truly is bad. And Scripture reveals that it gets even darker. Not only does humanity deserve hell and wrath for their rebellion against God, there is absolutely nothing we can do to atone for our rebellion. God's standard for righteousness is perfection, and we are unable and unwilling to live up to God's standard. There is no attempt towards moral uprightness that will make a difference; nothing we can say will take away our guilt. Mere behavior modification means nothing when compared to the infinite holiness of God and the magnitude of what took place in our rebellion against Him. This means that our fate is sealed. We are simply awaiting Judgment Day¹³ to fully receive our deserved eternal punishment.

Redemption. Humanity needs a Savior. Unable to reconcile with God, we have no hope to enjoy what God intended each person to experience in its fullness—His presence. Right in the middle of our sin and rebellion, left without any hope of salvation, Jesus enters into the picture. Jesus, the Hero of the Bible, leaves His eternal home in heaven and comes to the earth He created on a rescue mission.

The Bible reveals Jesus to be God's only Son, the promised Messiah, the second person in the Trinity, Creator, fully God, fully human, born of a virgin, without sin, and the *only* way to salvation¹⁴. The work of Jesus centers around His death. Even though Jesus' earthly ministry consisted of healing the sick, casting out demonic spirits, raising the dead, performing miracles, and preaching the Word of God, it is in His death where we see the goal of His incarnation and mission. The eyewitness accounts¹⁵ of Jesus' life record Him being sentenced to die on a cross. Wrongfully accused and completely innocent, Jesus *willingly* gave His life¹⁶. It is on the cross where Jesus makes the most profound declaration of His love for a sinful world.

Jesus dies in the place of sinners, acting as a substitute. Jesus pays the penalty for our sin—death. The innocent dies in place of the guilty; the Creator suffers for His creation. He died the death we deserve and received the

⁸ Romans 5:12

⁹ The Bible speaks of sin as a rebellion, a breach in a relationship, missing the mark, being unclean or becoming polluted, and as a legal transgression.

¹⁰ Genesis 3:14-24; Romans 8:20

¹¹ Genesis 2:17; Romans 6:23

¹² Romans 1:18; Romans 2:5; Ephesians 2:1-3; John 3:36

¹³ Hebrews 9:27; Matthew 24:36; 2 Peter 3:10-13

¹⁴ John 5:23; Isaiah 9:6-7; Matthew 3:16-17; Colossians 1:16; John 8:58; John 1:14; Matthew 1:23; 2 Corinthians 5:21; John 14:6

¹⁵ The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John

¹⁶ John 10:18

punishment for *our* rebellion. Although Jesus never sinned, on the cross He became our most vile, blasphemous, and selfish acts. What Jesus accomplished for sinful humanity on the cross can be more fully understood by becoming familiar with (3) biblical terms. On the cross Jesus became our:

- *Justification*¹⁷. This refers to how the work of Christ provides a way for unrighteous, guilty sinners to be declared righteous by God. But God cannot lie. He cannot declare clearly guilty sinners as innocent and continue to be good, holy, and just. So, how does He do it? We are justified through Jesus' perfect life, death, and resurrection. On the cross, the innocent died in the place of the guilty so the guilty could be declared innocent. Jesus paid in full the penalty for our sin—death. Not only did He die for all our sins—past, present, and future—but He also gives us *His* perfect righteousness. Therefore, when God looks at us, He accepts the sacrifice of his Son and can justly declare us as righteous, holy, and innocent of sin. He sees Jesus' sinless life; not our sin and rebellion. This is not God "winking" at our sin. The price He paid to justify humanity was costly. The death of Christ was the greatest sacrifice the world has ever known. There is absolutely no other way for humanity to be justified in God's sight apart from the cross of Christ.
- *Propitiation*¹⁸. Because God is good, holy, and just, He not only feels angry about sin, but deals with it in ways that are good, holy, and just. Because God is perfect, His anger and response to sin is perfect. Although it may seem in contradiction to the love of God, God's wrath towards sin and sinners flows from Him being a God of love. It is love that compels God to pour out wrath on those who do evil; those that assault who and what God loves. On the cross, Jesus becomes our propitiation. God's wrath, which we deserve, was diverted from us and onto Jesus. Jesus did not demand our blood, but offered His own to appease the wrath of God.
- *Ransom*¹⁹. Enslaved to sin, destined for the wrath of God, and having accrued an unpayable debt to God, humanity finds itself in the middle of a devastating reality. Jesus rescues humanity from the tragic result of their rebellion against God. Every time we sin against God we accrue a debt to God. The result of our sinful lives is a debt owed to God that we are unable to pay. Because our sins are against a perfect God, the payment must be perfect. This disqualifies any human from being able to settle the debt between them and God. Mark 10:45 declares Jesus came to pay our ransom. The cross of Christ erases any and all debts that we owe God due to our sin. Jesus provides the payment—perfection—that we are unable and unwilling to pay. In Jesus, our debt is paid, God can forgive our rebellion, and we can be rescued out of our slavery to sin.

Restoration. Followers of Christ have much to anticipate and be excited for when thinking of their futures. Through the gospel message, God promises that He will restore, redeem, and make new all of creation²⁰. The glory and perfection that the world knew before Genesis 3 will be a reality once again. Those that have been redeemed by Christ will get to experience this firsthand. The salvation they have begun to experience by placing their trust and faith in Christ will be fully realized and completed. Living in the fullness of God's presence, without sin, the redeemed will rule and reign over God's restored, perfect, and new creation alongside God himself²¹. Their eternal home will be absent of sin, suffering, sickness, tragedy, and evil²². God's enemy, Satan

¹⁷ Romans 4:24-25; Romans 5:1; Romans 5:18-19;

¹⁸ 1 John 2:2; 1 John 4:10; Hebrews 2:17

¹⁹ Mark 10:45

²⁰ Romans 8:21; Revelation 21

²¹ Revelation 21:3

²² Revelation 21:4

and demons, will be judged and eternally put away with so they can no longer tempt humanity and create chaos among God's children²³.

Those that reject Jesus now will not rejoice in Him after this life. Unrepentant sinners do not desire to spend eternity with Jesus, clearly seen by a life spent worshiping false gods and sin over the glory of Christ. Therefore, they will spend eternity apart from God and His glory. Every single person in hell has spent their life choosing sin over God. After their death and departure from this earth, that will not change. The Book of Revelation alludes to how unrepentant sinners will hide and even prefer death rather than see and stand before the face of Jesus²⁴. In the end, every person will spend eternity with the god that they chose to love, serve, and worship. This makes a person's response to the gospel message the *most important decision* they will ever make.

Evidences of Truthfulness

There are many evidences that affirm the gospel of Jesus Christ as true. The list that follows is far from exhaustive, but introduces several points to consider when thinking through Jesus' message of redemption. If God has life-changing truth that He desired all in the world to know, we could expect to find several things to be true of that message. We could expect that message to be:

- *Inclusive and exclusive in its nature.* The work of the gospel can be applied to all people, in all cultures, and throughout all times. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the most inclusive message to be communicated to the world. Factors such as age, ethnicity, economic status, gender, or family history do not keep anyone from receiving the love, benefits, and promises that come from centering one's life around the gospel of Jesus Christ. The gospel message also excludes all other religious messages and spiritualities from being truthful. Logically, we would expect such an exclusivity around the message that claims to be the truth concerning humanity's reconciliation to God. If Jesus *was not* exclusive and *did not* denounce other gospels and alleged spiritual truths, while knowing His message to be the only true one, it could be considered a very unloving act of silence on His part. He would knowingly allow humanity to follow a path to destruction without giving them any sort of warning.
- *Centered around a reliable figure.* The biblical gospel is centered around the person and work of Jesus Christ. The likelihood of truth concerning what a person is saying increases as that person shows themselves to be reliable and trustworthy. Biblically, and historically, Jesus is revealed to be a reliable, trustworthy, and truthful source. On a personal level, the deeper a person grows in relationship with Christ, the more they realize the reliability of His gospel message. Jesus proves Himself to be loving, truthful, powerful, and compassionate to all who will honestly open their heart to him.
- *Life-changing for a variety of people.* If the gospel of Jesus Christ is true, we should see some subjective evidence that it actually does what it claims to do. Surveying the history of the Christian church, it is profoundly easy to see the difference the gospel message has made in the lives of men and women throughout the world. The gospel has changed the neediest people, those who have been discarded by society, to the extremely wealthy who have no material needs. It has changed those who live in the middle of urban centers, to people that are a part of remote tribes located in Africa. Each and every generation of humanity has witnessed the transforming power of the gospel in the world.
- *Enduring, thriving, and spreading.* No message has endured more criticism than the gospel of Jesus Christ. Since Jesus first delivered the gospel from His own mouth in the First Century, every generation has seen an attack mounted against the gospel in some way. Followers of Christ have been persecuted,

²³ Revelation 20:10

²⁴ Revelation 6¹⁵⁻¹⁷

the reliability of Jesus has been questioned, and the gospel message itself has been picked apart. Whole civilizations have tried to silence the message of the gospel and prevent it from spreading. Yet, despite all that is done in opposition to the message, it has survived, it is thriving, and continues to be spread all over the world. It seems as if the message is being sustained by a divine and supernatural power.

- *One that makes sense out of the reality humans find themselves living in.* No message captures the reality and then makes sense of the human heart and existence quite like the gospel does. It addresses and answers the biggest questions concerning life that humanity seems to have.