

# Gospel Christianity

Leaders Guide | Course 1

*...know that a man is not justified by observing the law,  
but by faith in Jesus Christ.*

*Galatians 2: 11-16*



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# Gospel Christianity

## What is the Gospel?

### Study 1 | Course 1

The word “gospel” occurs so often in the New Testament that it is clearly a summary term for the basic core of what Christianity is all about. But what is that core?

#### KEY CONCEPT — GOSPEL

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

##### **The gospel is *news* rather than instruction.**

The Greek term “gospel” (*ev-angelion*) distinguished the Christian message from that of other religions.

- An “ev-angel” was news of a great historical event that changed the listeners’ condition and required response (such as a victory in war or the ascension of a new king).
- So the gospel is news of what God has done to accomplish salvation through Jesus Christ in history. It is not advice about what we must do to reach God.
- We do not achieve this salvation. We only accept it.

##### **The gospel is *grace* rather than merit.**

The gospel is: “I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey.” Religion is: “I obey, therefore I am accepted.” So the gospel differs from both religion and irreligion.

- You can seek to be your own “lord and savior” by breaking the law of God. But you can also do so by keeping the law in order to earn your salvation.
- Disbelief in the gospel of grace, of course, keeps the unconverted from God. But a lack of deep belief in the gospel is also the main cause of spiritual deadness, fear, and pride in Christians, because our hearts continue to act on the basis of “I obey, therefore I am accepted.”
  - a) Our failure to forgive others is not simply a lack of obedience, but a failure to believe we are saved by grace, too.
  - b) Our lying in order to cover up a mistake is not simply a lack of obedience, but a failure to find our acceptance in God rather than in human approval.
- So we do not “get saved” by believing the gospel and then “grow” by trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. Believing the gospel is not only the way to meet God, but also the way to grow into him.

**The gospel is *reversal* of the weak and the strong.**

Christ wins our salvation through losing, achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving all away. And those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit they are weak and lost.

- This pattern creates an alternate kingdom or city (Matt.5:14-16) in which there is a complete reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, wealth.
- When we understand that we can be saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation in these things. The reversal of the cross, the grace of God, thus liberates us from bondage to the power of material things and worldly status.
- This means we no longer disdain those of classes or races that we used to think beneath us.

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?**

The three statements are all important perspectives on the gospel.

- The first stresses the doctrinal content of the gospel. It shows us that the gospel is the news that Jesus Christ died and rose for our salvation in history.
- The second stresses the personal individual impact of the gospel. It shows that the gospel is a transforming grace that changes our hearts and inmost motives.
- The third stresses the social impact of the gospel. It shows that the gospel brings a new order in which believers no longer are controlled by material goods or worldly status and have solidarity with others across traditional social barriers.

These three perspectives are Biblical and should be kept together. There is a tendency for Christians and churches to major on just one of these perspectives and ignore the others.

- If you stress the *social impact* to the exclusion of others, you might call loudly for social justice, but your ministry would not convert people and give them the changed lives they need to serve the needs of the poor.
- If you stress the *doctrinal content* to the exclusion of the others, you might have a ministry that was very doctrinally accurate but failed to apply the gospel to practical psychological and social issues.
- If you over-stress the *personal impact*, you might psychologize the gospel so that it is presented as strictly a way for an individual to overcome his or her guilt and unhappiness.

**2. “If you are saved no matter how you live, what incentive is there for living a virtuous, obedient life?” Formulate some answers.**

There is both a negative and positive response to this question.

**The Negative Response**

There is a hidden premise in this question. The premise is that once the fear of condemnation is taken away there will be no incentive for leading a life that pleases God. But if you have no incentive to be holy once all fear of condemnation and rejection is removed, then the only incentive you really had to be holy was fear!

- The gospel of sheer grace reveals and removes a motivation to “be good” that was essentially selfish and negative.
- Of course, when you are deeply in love and sure of the other person’s unconditional commitment to you, there is a kind of fear motivation. But it is not primarily fear for you — that you may be rejected and hurt — but fear for the other — that he or she will be dishonored and hurt.
- Your motivation to submit to the will of the beloved is not fear of being rejected, but rather fear of disappointing the one who will never reject you.

**The Positive Response**

So if you know that “there is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1), what incentive is there for living a virtuous, obedient life? All the incentive in the world. Here are just three aspects of it.

1. We live a virtuous life because we want to delight the Lord who saved us.

- When he died on the cross, he did not “please himself” (Rom 15:1-3). In a sense, he placed his happiness *within* our happiness. That is, he so identifies his heart with our interests that what brings *us* good and pleasure automatically brings him pleasure.
- So anyone who has experienced the grace and love of God in the gospel, finds growing within, a desire to bring God delight and pleasure. We now do not serve him just in order to get things from him.
- As he put his happiness within ours — so now we put our happiness within his. Our delight is to know he is delighted.

2. We live a virtuous life because we want to resemble the Lord who saved us.

- There is a deep human instinct to imitate what we admire and honor.
- To honor great people, for example, we make images of them — statues and paintings. And we urge people to emulate them.

- A godly life is the deepest way to honor the one who lived and died to serve and save us. We make ourselves into images of him.

3. We live a virtuous life because we want to get near and have fellowship with him.

- In religion, we go to God because he is useful for getting the things our heart most wants.
- In the gospel, we go to God because he is beautiful. We go simply to get God himself. We want to sense his presence and we know that living a life imitating him is the way to do that.

In summary, the gospel makes the law of God a thing of beauty instead of a burden. We can use it to delight, resemble, and have fellowship with the one who has saved us rather than to get his attention or procure his favor. We now run the race "for the joy that is set before us" rather than "for the fear that comes behind us."

**3. "Well, if you know you are always forgiven then what incentive is there for ever repenting?" Formulate some answers.**

It is important to consider how the gospel affects and transforms the very act of repentance. In religion, the purpose of repentance is basically to keep God happy so he will continue to bless you and answer your prayers. This means that "religious repentance" is selfish, self-righteous, and bitter all the way to the bottom.

1. Religious repentance is selfish. In religion we are sorry for sin mainly because of its consequences to us. It will bring us punishment and we want to avoid that. So we repent.
  - The gospel tells us that sin can't ultimately bring us into condemnation (Rom 8:1). Its heinousness is therefore what it does to God; it displeases and dishonors him.
  - Thus in religion, repentance is self-centered; the gospel makes it God-centered. In religion, we are mainly sorry for the consequences of sin, but in the gospel we are sorry for the sin itself.
2. Religious repentance is self-righteous. The repentance easily becomes a form of atoning for the sin. Religious repentance often becomes a form of self-flagellation in which we convince God (and ourselves) that we are so truly miserable and regretful that we deserve to be forgiven.



- In the gospel, however, we know that Jesus suffered and was miserable for our sin. We do not make ourselves suffer in order to merit forgiveness. We simply receive the forgiveness earned by Christ.
  - 1 John 1:8 says that God forgives us because he is “just.” This is a remarkable statement. It would be unjust of God now to ever deny us forgiveness, because Jesus earned our acceptance!
  - In religion, we are *earning* our forgiveness with our repentance, but in the gospel we are just *receiving* it.
3. Religious repentance is bitter all the way down. In religion, our only hope is to live a good enough life for God to bless us. Therefore every instance of sin and repentance is traumatic, unnatural and horribly threatening.
- Only under great duress does a religious person admit they have sinned because their only hope is their moral goodness.
  - But in the gospel, the knowledge of our acceptance in Christ makes it *easier* to admit we are flawed because we know we won’t be cast off if we confess the true depths of our sinfulness.
    - a. Our hope is in Christ’s righteousness, not our own, so it is not so traumatic to admit our weaknesses and lapses.
  - In religion, we repent less and less often. But the more accepted and loved in the gospel we feel, the *more* and *more often* we will be repenting.
  - And though, of course, there is always some bitterness in any repentance, in the gospel there is ultimately a sweetness.
    - a. This creates a radical new dynamic for personal growth.
    - b. The more you see your own flaws and sins, the more precious, electrifying, and amazing God’s grace appears to you.
    - c. But on the other hand, the more aware you are of God’s grace and acceptance in Christ, the more you are able to drop your denials and self-defenses and admit the character and true dimensions of your sin.

## BIBLE STUDY

Galatians 2:11-16

**1. Why did Peter originally begin “eating with Gentiles” (v.15-16a)? What led him to stop (v.12b)?****Why did Peter originally begin eating with Gentiles?**

Circumcision, refraining from eating with Gentiles, and refraining from eating certain foods were parts of the Jewish ceremonial law by which Jews prepared themselves to be clean and fit for the presence of God in worship.

- Peter began eating with Gentiles (v.12) because God had shown him that no one is made clean and fit for the presence of God by their own moral efforts. We are acceptable (“*justified*”) before God only by faith in Christ.
- Peter had learned this (v.15-16a). He knew that no one is “unclean” in Christ. This was the way he learned he could, as a Jew, eat with Gentile Christian believers.
- [Read Acts 10 and 11 to see how Peter was forcefully shown this by God through the conversion of Cornelius. After God had shown him this Peter ate with Gentiles despite criticism (Acts 11:2). Even later he asserts that the Gentiles have been “*purified [made clean] by faith*” (Acts 15:7-9).]

**What led him to stop?**

When Peter withdrew from the Gentiles, it was not just cowardice but “*hypocrisy*.” Peter could not have forgotten something as momentous as the vision at Joppa and the conversion of Cornelius.

- He did not really change his mind or convictions. He still believed the gospel — that we are “clean” through Jesus alone — but he did not act in accordance with his deepest understanding and convictions.
- What then led Peter to act as he did? We are told “*he was afraid*” (v.12).
  - a) Perhaps he was simply afraid of criticism.
  - b) It is possible that he was also afraid of persecution by Jewish authorities.
- But in addition, his old racial pride may have re-asserted itself. Peter and all the Jews had been drilled since their youth that Gentiles were “unclean.”

- In any case, Peter was allowing cultural differences to become more important than gospel unity. He was denying with his practice the gospel he knew in his mind.

## 2. What do you think Paul meant when he said that Peter was not “acting in line with the truth of the gospel” (v.14)? How is racism not “in line with the gospel?”

The NIV translation gives a very good literal sense of Paul’s Greek words. He says that they were “not *ortho*-walking with the gospel.” (The prefix *ortho* means to be straight.)

- This means, first, that the gospel is a truth — it is a message, a set of claims.
  - a) It includes the fact that we are weak and sinful, that we seek to control our lives by being our own saviors and lords, that God’s law was fulfilled by Christ for us, that we are now accepted completely though we are still very sinful and flawed, and so on.
- This means, second, that this gospel truth has a vast number of implications for all of life.
  - a) It is our job to bring everything in our lives in line with the thrust or direction of the gospel. We are to think out its implications in every area of our lives, and seek to bring our thinking, feeling and behavior in line.
  - b) The gospel truth is radically opposed to the assumptions of the world. But since we live in the world, we have embraced many of the world’s assumptions.
  - c) Christian living is therefore a continual realignment process of bringing everything in line with the truth of the gospel.

### How is racism not “in line” with the gospel?

Paul’s basic argument to Peter is this: “You now know that Jewish customs have no moral merit in them for you. You are saved by Christ’s spiritual and moral cleanness not yours! So how can you tell Gentiles that these customs have moral merit for them?”

- Paul goes to the very root of racism. It is fine to be proud of your culture and race, but race-*ism* comes when you make your race a way of feeling morally superior to others.
- Without the gospel — with the human heart in its self-justification mode — we take pride in our race’s accomplishments and particularities and we love to contrast them to what we see of the failings of other races and cultures.

- Racism is a continuation of “works-righteousness” in one part of our lives. It is a failure to bring our relationships with other cultures into line with grace-salvation.
- But the gospel destroys this kind of pride and fills our hearts and removes our need to score points and feel superior to other races, classes and groups.

Paul’s analysis of racism is extremely significant and unique.

- He does not simply say that racism is a sin (which it is). He uses the gospel to show us its spiritual roots. Without this knowledge we can’t do anything about it.
- Paul did not simply say, “Repent of the sin of racism” but “Repent of the sin of forgetting your gracious welcome in Christ!” He did not focus so much on the sinful behavior as he did the sin at the root, the self-righteousness underneath it.
- This is a very different way of “opposing” someone. When you are trying to motivate people by urging them to see their riches and love in Christ, then you personally are pointing to their value and dignity as you appeal.
- But when you try to motivate people by threatening them, you will probably feel little respect for them as you do so, and they will (rightly) sense that you are not on their side. When we use God’s grace as a motivator, we can criticize sharply and directly, but the other person will generally be able to perceive that we are nonetheless *for* him. No wonder Paul was winsome in this situation!

### **3. In vv. 15-16, Paul talks of being “justified” in Christ. How does the controversy over the clean laws shed light on the meaning of justification?**

Here Paul introduces the term “justification” for the first time. Why does he do it here? We should connect this concept to Paul’s controversy with Peter.

- Traditionally, Jews did not eat with Gentiles because they were “unclean.” When Peter refrained from eating with Gentiles, Paul reminded him of what he had learned through revelation (Acts 11:8-10; 15:8-9) — that in Christ we are “clean.”
- This is what circumcision and the food laws and all the ceremonial laws were about in the Old Testament. *You had to be clean to go to worship, to be acceptable in the eyes and presence of God.*
- Though the word “clean” does not show up in Galatians 2:11-13, that is what “circumcision” (v.12) and eating and all the rules and regulations were about.

- Now Paul introduces “justification” (v.15-16). This can only mean that justification is essentially the same thing as being “clean” and acceptable for the presence and fellowship of God.
- As Paul tells us elsewhere, it is Christ who makes us “*holy and blameless in his sight*” (Col. 1:23) and “*without stain or wrinkle or any other blemish, but holy and blameless*” (Eph.5:27).

**Addendum**

“‘Justification’ is a legal term borrowed from the law courts. It is the exact opposite of ‘condemnation’ (cf. Deut.25:1; Prov.17:15; Rom.8:33, 34). ‘To condemn’ is to declare somebody guilty; ‘to justify’ is to declare him... righteous. In the Bible it refers to God’s act of unmerited favor by which He puts a sinner right with himself, not only pardoning or acquitting him, but accepting and treating him as righteous.”

– John Stott, Galatians p.60

## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

There is a righteousness which Paul calls “the righteousness of faith.” God imputes it to us apart from our works — in other words, it is *passive* righteousness... So then, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, *nothing at all!* For this righteousness comes by doing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, but rather in knowing and believing this only — that Christ has gone to the right hand of the Father, not to become our judge, but to become *for us* our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation! Now God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness sin has no place. So now we may certainly think, “Although I still sin, I don’t despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life.” In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God.

Christians never completely understand [this] themselves, and thus do not take advantage of it when they are troubled and tempted. So we have to constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice. Anyone who does not understand this righteousness or cherish it in the heart and conscience will continually be buffeted by fears and depression. *Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness.* The troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by *grace*, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, which is this passive or Christian righteousness... Once you are in Christ, the Law is the greatest guide for your life, but until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is to show you how sinful and condemned you are. But if we first receive Christian righteousness, then we can use the law, not for our salvation, but for his honor and glory, and to lovingly show our gratitude.

– Martin Luther <sup>1</sup>

Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives... Many... have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for their justification... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther’s platform: *you are accepted*, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude... Much that we have

interpreted as a defect of sanctification in church people is really an outgrowth of their loss of bearing with respect to justification. Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons... Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce, defensive assertion of their own righteousness, and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger.

– Richard Lovelace<sup>2</sup>

### Application questions

#### 1. Which statements impressed you and why?

#### 2. What does it mean to reverse sanctification and justification? What are some ways we do this in our personal lives?

In classic Christian theology *justification* refers to the once-and-for-all legal action by which God accepts us because of the work of Jesus Christ, while *sanctification* refers to gradual growth in holy character and behavior.

- To reverse the gospel, to “base your justification on your sanctification,” means that we assume God’s love and acceptance of us is based on the quality of our behavior and the purity of our hearts. We obey God’s law out of a fear of rejection and out of a desire to create a good self-image through our moral efforts.
- However, to “base your sanctification on your justification” is to assume God’s love and acceptance of us is secured in Christ, and then to obey God’s law out of a desire to delight, resemble, and know him.

Some of the common ways we do this are mentioned in Luther and Lovelace's quotes:

- If we cannot feel forgiven after a sin or failure until we have spent a great deal of time in misery and pain, we may be basing our acceptance with God (justification) on how much we have groveled, beaten ourselves up, and made ourselves miserable.
- If we are proud and harsh toward others, we may be basing our acceptance with God on moral standards that we believe we are fulfilling.
- If we feel like failures, filled with low self-esteem, we may be basing our acceptance with God on moral standards that we believe we are not fulfilling.

The unique self-image that the gospel brings us is *that we are more wicked than we ever dared believe, but more loved and accepted in Christ than we ever dared hope — at the very same time.*

- When you "base your justification on your sanctification," you can be either bold and confident or humble and self-effacing depending on whether you are living up to your own standards or not.
- But if you are "basing your sanctification on your justification," then you can be both confident and humble — bold and sweetly sensitive — at the same time.
- Both a superiority and an inferiority complex are evidences of reversing sanctification and justification.

**3. The gospel is neither religion nor irreligion, since both are just different strategies of self-salvation. Choose one or two issues and think out a gospel approach that is neither religious nor irreligious.**

#### Discouragement

- When a person is depressed, the religious say, "You are breaking the rules — repent."
- On the other hand, the irreligious say, "You just need to love and accept yourself."
- But (assuming there is no physiological base of the depression!) the gospel leads us to examine ourselves and say, "Something in my life has become more important than Christ, a pseudo-savior, a form of works-righteousness."



- The religious will tend to work on behavior and the irreligious will tend to work on the emotions, but the gospel works on the heart.

### Relationships

- The religious often use relationships to convince themselves they are worthy persons. This often creates what is called “co-dependency,” a form of self-salvation through needing people or needing people to need you (i.e. saving yourself by saving others).
- On the other hand, the irreligious often reduce love to a negotiated partnership for mutual benefit. You only relate as long as it is not costing you anything.
- So the choice (without the gospel) is to selfishly use others or to selfishly let yourself be used by others!
- But in Christ we see a man who unconditionally sacrificed for us out of love for us not need for us.
- When we get both the emotional-humility (“I’m so sinful he had to die for me”) and the emotional-wealth (“I was so loved he was glad to die for me”), we are moved to humbly serve others, but not out of inappropriate need.
- We do sacrifice and commit, but not out of a need to convince ourselves or others we are acceptable. So we can love the person enough to confront, yet stay with the person when it does not benefit us.

### Suffering

- The religious believe God owes them a happy life, since the whole point of living a good life is to put God in their debt. So when the religious suffer, they must either feel mad at God (“I’ve been living right — and this is what I get??”) or mad at themselves (“I must have not been living right”) or both at once!
- On the other hand, the irreligious do absolutely everything to avoid suffering. They see no use for it at all. Its presence renders life meaningless.
- But the cross shows us that we had a suffering God. The gospel on the one hand takes away our surprise and pique over suffering. We see *him* suffering without complaint for us.
- So we know that we deserve to be eternally lost but by mercy we will never get what we deserve. This eliminates self-pity.

- On the other hand, we know God could not be punishing us for our sin since Jesus paid for our sins, and God cannot receive two payments. This means that whatever suffering we are receiving is not retribution, but instruction.
- If you face suffering with a clear grasp of justification by grace alone, your joy in that grace will deepen, but if you face suffering with a mindset of justification by works, the suffering will break you, not make you. "He suffered not that we might not suffer, but that in our suffering we could become like him."
- Since both the religious and the irreligious ignore the cross in different ways, they will both be confused and devastated by suffering.

### Family

- Religion can make you a slave to parental expectations, while irreligion may see no need for family loyalty or the keeping of promises and covenants if they do not "meet my needs."
- The gospel frees you from making parental approval an absolute or psychological salvation, pointing out how God becomes the ultimate Father. Then you will be neither, too dependent on or too hostile to, your parents.

### **Suggested further study**

Richard Lovelace - *Renewal as a Way of Life* (IVP, 1985)

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther "Preface" in *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (James Clarke, 1953 edition)

<sup>2</sup> Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (IVP, 1979)

# Gospel Christianity

## Who is God?

### Study 2 | Course 1

There is no more fundamental question than “*Who is God?*” In the Bible, God reveals so many things about himself! Where do we begin? We begin with the *glory* of God.

#### KEY CONCEPT — GLORY

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

The first place in the Bible we hear of God’s “glory” is in Exodus.

- When he first reveals himself to Israel, his immediate presence is characterized by overwhelming brilliance, a shining cloud that appeared to be white-hot fire.
- This first appeared in the desert and on Sinai’s peak (Exodus 16:10; 24:16-17) but eventually settled into the tabernacle itself (Exodus 40:33-35; Psalm 26:8).
- Yet it is evident that God’s glory is not only a literal light, since the Bible says all of the natural creation is full of light (Psalm 19:1; Numbers 14:21).

The importance of God’s glory is seen in the following outline:

- God made the created world for his glory (Psalm 19:1ff).
- God will heal the broken world with his glory (Isaiah 35:2).
- God made us for his glory (Isaiah 43:7).
- God saved us to praise his glory (Ephesians 1:12).
- God does everything for his own glory.
- When he judges, he does so for his own glory (Exodus 14:4).
- When he shows mercy, he does so for his own glory (Isaiah 48:11).

We must do everything we do for his glory (1 Corinthians 10:31)

“God... is infinitely the greatest and best of beings. All things else, with regard to worthiness, importance, and excellence, are perfectly as nothing in comparison to him... The ultimate [goal] of God’s works is... *the glory of God.*”

– Jonathan Edwards

"The Biblical word 'glory' is (Heb) *kavod* [which] means heavy, weighty, significant... The 'glory of the Lord' indicates the brilliance that is connected with all God's virtues and his self-revelation in nature and grace... As an object of loving adoration it is called his [*beauty*]. As an object of our reverent submission it is called his *majesty*. As an object of our joyous gratitude it is called his [*worthiness*]."

– Herman Bavinck

"God's goal [in all he does] is his glory, but this is easily misunderstood. The glory that is his goal is a two-sided, two-stage relationship. It is a conjunction of a) revelatory acts on his part whereby he shows us his glory, with b) responsive adoration in which we give him glory for what we have seen and received. In this conjunction is realized the fellowship of love for which [we] were made."

– J.I. Packer

"The Father... Son... and Holy Spirit glorify each other... Self-giving love is the dynamic currency of the Trinitarian life of God. The persons within God exalt, commune with, and defer to one other... Each harbors the others at the center of his being. In constant movement of overture and acceptance each person envelopes and encircles the others. [So] Creation is neither a necessity nor an accident. Instead, given God's interior life that overflows with regard for others, we might say creation is an act that was *fitting* for God... In creation God graciously made room in the universe for other kinds of beings. God's splendor [glory] becomes clearer whenever the Son of God powerfully spends himself in order to cause others to flourish... Jesus Christ's pattern of life in the world reproduces the inner life of God."

– Cornelius Plantinga

**1. What statements in the section above impressed you and why?**

**2. According to Edwards and Bavinck, how does “glory” relate to the other attributes of God (such as his power, love, wisdom, mercy, righteousness)?**

Bavinck and Edwards point out that the “glory” of God is not so much one more of his attributes as it is the infinitely superior worth, beauty, and excellence

- a) of each of his attributes and
- b) of all of his attributes in their unique combination.

The innumerable attributes, names and metaphors for God *all* exhibit how glorious he is. Edwards is right to speak of “glory,” then, in terms of comparison.

- God is not just wise and loving, but he is *gloriously* or surpassingly so. (He is the best and greatest in every quality).
- He is not just important and worthy of your adoration, submission, and attention, but *gloriously* or supremely so. (He is infinitely more worthy of your adoration, submission, and attention than anyone or anything else). Every other being is “*less than nothing*” in comparison with his glory (cf. Isaiah 40:5, 15-17, 25).

God’s glory is often expressed in the Scripture as blazing, blinding luminosity (Exodus 16:10), which conveys this concept of utter excellence and superlativeness.

- The unbearable brilliance of God also gets across the ultimate incomprehensibility of God to our finite minds.

**3. Why, as Packer says, is it easy to misunderstand the statement that “God seeks his own glory” in all his deeds and creatures?**

God’s seeking his own glory is easily misunderstood, because the same sort of behavior in a human being is quite awful! Anyone who demands that everyone constantly praise him or her will be seen as horribly disagreeable.

It is natural to ask: “Why would God need to create people to praise him all the time? It seems so egotistical to me!” Packer, however, says that when God calls us to glorify him, he is really calling us into a relationship. See more on this below.

## BIBLE STUDY #1

1 Chronicles 16:23-36; Psalm 104:24-34

**What do you learn here about what it means to glorify, to give glory to God, or to treat God as glorious?**

Obviously, to “glorify God” means to praise and adore him. The two passages ring with calls to sing his praises and declare his glory. But what does that mean? I think we can break this down into the following aspects. (These are not the only ones, I’m sure!)

1. It means to (mentally) recognize supreme excellence in him. It is to acknowledge that he is the measure and standard of all things, the best and the greatest of beings in the universe.
  - a) He is greater than all other gods (1 Chr 16:25); he is the source of everything in creation (Ps 104:24).
  - b) There is no definition of goodness, or love, or power, or wisdom except in God. All else is good, loving, powerful, or wise only in relationship to him.
  - c) Nothing deserves our deepest respect and honor more than the Lord, before whom we should all tremble and fear (1 Chr 16:30).
2. It means to (volitionally) ascribe ultimate value to him. It is to give him the centrality or priority in our lives.
  - a) We are to give God his “due” (1 Chr 16:29), that is, we are to recognize his value or ‘worthiness’ (1 Chr 16:25). His value is absolute, greater than all other objects that might be worshipped (1 Chr 16:25-26).
  - b) In the simplest terms possible, to glorify God means to make him the most important thing in your life.
    - i. It means to trust him more than anything else and to obey him unconditionally.
    - ii. It means everything else is judged by whether it enhances (or detracts) from his honor, or from your relationship to him.
  - c) Once we recognize his ultimate beauty, we realize that we must be willing to pay anything to have him and to honor him. That is how much he is “worth.”

3. It means to (emotionally) *find your ultimate joy or pleasure* in him. It is to find him your deepest satisfaction.

- a) We notice in the texts that to glorify him, to praise him, and to enjoy him are different aspects of the same action.
  - i. We find joy in his glory-presence (1 Chr 16:27).
  - ii. The Psalmist gets joy when he meditates on the glory of God revealed in his works of creation (Psalm 104: 34).
  - iii. Even more remarkably, God himself gets joy as he surveys his own glory in the works of creation (Psalm 104:31).
- b) Joyful singing also comes as we survey his glory revealed in the works of salvation and redemption (1 Chr 16:23).
- c) Thanks, joy, and adoration unite in the act of “glorifying” in his praise (1 Chr 16:35) — which seems to mean that we experience some kind of fullness and greatness as we glorify him.
- d) To acknowledge his glory is to rejoice in him jubilantly as the very trees of the wood will do when he comes to rule them (1 Chr 16:31-33).

This aspect of glorifying God is to see God’s *beauty*. David speaks of seeing God’s beauty (Ps 27:4) and glory (Ps 63:2-5) almost synonymously.

- To find an object beautiful is to enjoy it or find it satisfying in itself.
- When you sit gazing in wonder at the ocean or the mountains you don’t do so as an instrument to reach some other goal. The very sight of the ocean or the mountains is fulfilling in itself.
- The Bible, of course, says that this is because the created universe is giving you glimpses of God’s glory. See Psalm 19.

### Summary

- To glorify God is not to go to God mainly to get his help, forgiveness, guidance or strength but to get him.
- It is to move beyond a general belief in God to *knowing* his glory. This comes when the Holy Spirit gives you a sense of his beauty — when thinking about who he is and what he has done becomes pleasing to the mind and satisfying to the heart *in itself*.
- Other subordinate joys become means to the end of serving and knowing God. In other words, we don’t obey God mainly to get health, peace, comfort or success, but to mainly give him pleasure and honor.
- Why? Because we have put our joy and happiness *into* his joy and happiness. Making him happy *is* what gives us joy.

## BIBLE STUDY #2

John 17:1-26

**1. Verses 1-5, 20-24. a) What is the main thing the Father and the Son do with and for one another? b) What is the reason that they do it? c) What are the things Jesus wants for his followers?**a) What is the main thing they do?

- The main thing the Father and the Son do with and for one another is “glorify” or “give glory” to one another. This is mentioned in verses 1, 4, 5, 22 and 24.
- This is what God was “doing” in the infinite, beginning-less eternity before the creation of time, history and the world (v.5 and v.24).
- John 16:14 indicates that the Spirit also participated in this “mutual glorification.”

b) What is the reason that they do it?

- The reason that the Father glorifies the Son (and, implied, the reason that the Son glorifies the Father) is because the Father loves the Son (v.24, cf. v.26). They glorify one another as an expression of their deep love for each other.
- Love naturally leads to adoration and praise. Thus, it is natural when you love and value any object, to affirm and extol its strengths, excellence and beauties. You really can’t help it.
- This kind of expression is intrinsic to the love and joy you have in the person or the thing. See the quote by C.S. Lewis below.
- We all know something of this in personal relationships as well. Two lovers delight in admiring and affirming what is great and excellent in the other.
- And the greatest joy is not to *seek* admiration but only to *give* it — and then to find that we receive it freely in return.
- In all of this we simply reflect the inter-personal love of the inner being of God.

c) What does Jesus want for his followers?

- Jesus wants the same two things for his followers that the Father and the Son have.



- a) He wants them to have the loving unity that the Father and the Son have (v.20-23).
- b) He wants them to see and appreciate his glory — that is, to glorify him fully, just as the Father and the Son glorify each other.

## 2. Why was the Son willing to lose his glory and come to earth? (See vv.1, 4, 22, 24).

- The Son was willing to lose his glory (v.5 – *with the glory I had with you*) by coming to earth. But his reasons for doing so were:
  - a) To “bring” glory to the Father (v.4) in the work of salvation.
  - b) To “give” glory to his followers (v.22, so that they may some day “see” Jesus’ glory themselves (v.24).
- What is remarkable is the other-orientation that is at the essence of God’s nature!
  - a) Even when Jesus asks God to glorify him, it is so that Jesus can glorify the Father (v.1). That is his motive for wanting glory back!
  - b) Also, he implies that the other reason he wants his glory back is so that his followers can see his glory (v.24).
  - c) In other words, at the very heart of the Godhead is the disposition to give joy, love and affirmation to another. In fact, the disposition is to seek glory in order to give glory to the other.

## 3. What (by implication) is the reason God created us? (See v.24)

- It is difficult to imagine any reason why an infinitely perfect God would create anything at all. Why would an eternal God create time-bound beings such as humans?
  - a) It appears that God would create such beings because he “needed” them to glorify him. But God would only “need” beings to glorify him if he was uni-personal.
  - b) If God was uni-personal, then he could not have known mutual love, communication, joy and glory until he created other intelligent beings. Then we could truly say God “needed” this since he did not have it.
  - c) But the Christian Trinitarian concept of God does not face that problem. If God is tri-personal then he already *had* infinite love and joy in relationship.

- Why then did he create us? The answer is strongly implied in v.23-24. God did not create us to get the cosmic, infinite joy of mutual love and glorification, but to share it!
  - a) It is completely consistent for a loving God — who is “other-oriented” in his very core, who seeks glory only to give it to others — to create a universe to share the cosmic joy, love and mutual glorification of the Godhead with others.
  - b) It is appropriate for a perfectly good and loving being to communicate that love to intelligent beings. God’s joy, happiness and delight in divine perfections and beauty is expressed by communicating that perfect beauty and therefore joy to others.
  - c) The happiness of humans, then, can only be ultimately realized by knowing God and by realizing that the derivative glory of the natural world is but an echo of his own.
  - d) The ultimate goal of creation is union in love between God and his creatures.

## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

What we have, then, is a picture of God whose love, even before the creation of anything, is other-oriented. This cannot be said (for instance) of Allah... There has always been an other-orientation in the very nature of God... We are the friends of God by virtue of the intra-Trinitarian love of God that so worked out in the fullness of time that the plan of redemption, conceived in the mind of God in eternity past, has exploded into our space-time history at exactly the right moment.

– D. A. Carson <sup>1</sup>

For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is... infinitely the most beautiful and excellent. All the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but a reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory. God is the foundation of all being and all beauty.

– Jonathan Edwards <sup>2</sup>

When I first began to draw near to belief in God and even for some time after, I found a stumbling block in the demand that we should “praise” God; still more in the suggestion that God Himself demanded it. We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue... but the most obvious fact about praise — whether of God or anything, strangely escaped me. I never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. The world rings with praise — lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game... Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible...

Men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: “Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?” Indeed we can’t help doing it...because praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation... Our expressions of praise are inadequate — but how if one could really and fully praise things to perfection — then indeed our delight would attain perfect development! To understand what [heaven] means we must imagine ourselves in perfect love with God — drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves... flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression — our joy no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds. The

Scots catechism says a man's chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. But then we will know these are the same thing. To fully enjoy is to glorify — in commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy him.

– C.S. Lewis <sup>3</sup>

We are all starved for the glory of God, not self. No one goes to the Grand Canyon to increase self-esteem. Why do we go? Because there is greater healing for the soul in beholding splendor than there is in beholding self... The point is this: We were made to know and treasure the glory of God above all things; and when we trade that treasure for images, everything is disordered. The sun of God's glory was made to shine at the center of the solar system of our soul. And when it does, all the planets of our life are held in their proper orbit. But when the sun is displaced, everything flies apart. The healing of the soul begins by restoring the glory of God to its flaming, all-attracting place at the center.

– John Piper <sup>4</sup>

### Summary

The universe was literally an explosion of God's glory — created to reflect and communicate his glory and beauty to us — so that, as we increasingly come to adore and enjoy his glory in all things and especially in his Son, Jesus Christ, we may increasingly share in God's own happiness and delight.

**Application questions**

- 1. We said that it is natural that God's call to glorify him is subject to misunderstanding. It sounds like he needs it and that he is egotistical. Write your own answer to this misunderstanding based on what you've learned.**

Basically, this misunderstanding overlooks two key truths:

1. It overlooks the strong link between joy and praise as well as love and praise.

- a) C. S. Lewis articulates this link in the classic text printed above.  
Praise is not simply the result of but the completion of enjoyment.
- b) We could go even further and say praise is not simply the result of but the completion of love. You can't love someone without praising them, and as you praise them you *are* loving them.
- c) Of course these three — love, joy, and praise — are all just different aspects of one another. But the point is that when God commands us to glorify him he is simply calling us into a relationship of love and joy.

2. It overlooks the tri-personal nature of God.

- a) If God was uni-personal, then it would be true that until he created intelligent beings he lacked an experience of mutual love, joy and glorification.
- b) So if you believe in a uni-personal God, you must either believe that God was not originally perfect or that loving relationships are not important and essential to ultimate reality.
- c) These are the horns of a huge philosophical dilemma. You have either an imperfect God or a universe in which loving relationships are secondary and passing.
- d) But the doctrine of the Trinity means that the act of creation makes sense. It is natural for a loving God to want to share his joy of community with others.

It is consistent with the nature of a God who is essentially loving to create a world of beings and communicate that love and delight he had in himself to them.

- The universe, then, came into being as an explosion of God's glory.
- Perfect goodness, beauty and love radiate from God and draw his creatures to ever-increasingly share in God's joy and delight.
- They do so as they come to rejoice in divine glory as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit already do.
- They do so as they come, not to seek glory for themselves, but as they give glory to God, as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit already do.
- This process of growth in happiness will go on forever, eternally increasing unimaginably (1 Cor 2:7-10).

**2. God created the world and us so we could share in the love, joy and glory of the intra-personal Trinity. There are innumerable practical implications and applications to this! We will tease some out in the coming weeks. But for now, think out some of them yourselves.**

**a) What mistaken thoughts, distorted emotions or wrong practices result when I don't focus enough on God's gloriousness?**

1. When I forget God's glory, I give pre-eminence to other objects in my life.  
Other things — perhaps very good things — become too important to me. We will look into this much more next week, but this is a profound definition of sin.
  - a) A more superficial definition of sin is "breaking God's rules." That, of course, is true. But it is possible to sin without violating any actual rules for behavior.
  - b) When you make family or work or even your moral record more important than God in your life — when you look to them for more joy and hope than you do for God — they become central to your life and you get distortions. We will look at this next week.
  - c) Whenever you make your family, nation or something else the ultimate thing in your life, it breaks the universe apart through private interest. Only when God's glory is pre-eminent do I love "being in general" — the common good!
2. When I forget God's glory, I think of worship only as a duty and not as a fulfillment or as a pleasure.
  - a) I am called to know and relate to God. Of course, worship is a duty since it is God's "due." Because of who he is and what he has done, we owe him praise and honor.

- b) But a weak grasp of the nature of God's attribute of glory will mean that worship is not a priority in my life.
- c) In particular, I will not realize the importance of praise. If I pray, my prayer life will consist mainly in making petitions and confessions.

3. When I forget God's glory, I tend to think that the key to my life is to build myself up and seek self-esteem.

- a) The doctrine of God's glory reminds me that ultimately my deepest needs will not be met through seeking self-esteem, but through seeking God-esteem.
- b) C. S. Lewis said, "Aim mainly at heaven and you get earth thrown in. Aim mainly at earth and you get neither."
- c) So we could paraphrase: "Aim mainly at God-esteem, and self-esteem will flow rather naturally. Aim mainly at self-esteem and you will get neither." We will understand this dynamic more as the course of lessons proceeds.

4. When I forget God's glory, I may forget the value of individual persons.

- a) Every human being is of infinite value and worth because each of us is made "in the image" of God.
- b) To deface the image of a great person is to show dishonor to that great person him or herself.
- c) So God holds murderers accountable because every human being has assaulted God's glory (See Genesis 9).
- d) The glory of God, then, is the basis for treating every human being with justice and dignity.

**b) What mistaken thoughts, distorted emotions or wrong practices result when I forget the reason God created the world and us?**

1. When I forget this, I may lose the ground-note of celebration and joy that should characterize our lives.

- a) The Trinity "rejoiced" the universe into being! (Or perhaps we could say the Trinity "sang" the universe into being. Compare the creation stories of C.S. Lewis in *The Magician's Nephew* and J.R.R. Tolkien in *The Silmarillion*.)

- b) Creation was the off-shoot of their adoration, love and enjoyment of one another's glory and beauty.
  - c) So then we were basically made to praise, enjoy and appreciate the glory of God, that glory which is seen:
    - i. in nature around us,
    - ii. in human beings made in God's image,
    - iii. in the salvation we have experienced,
    - iv. and ultimately in God's own face.
  - d) This is why C.S. Lewis says that praise is "inner health made audible." We should have a natural instinct to affirm what is good in others, and to enjoy and appreciate what is good in our environment and in our life.
  - e) We should have a ground-note of joy and gratitude running through our lives.
    - i. Perfectionism and a critical spirit can drain our lives of what we were created for.
    - ii. Disproportionate self-criticism can be terribly damaging.
    - iii. Many Christians believe it is more spiritual to find the fault in everything, but that is only a means to the ultimate end of joy.
2. When I forget this, I may underestimate the importance of human community.
- a) In all other views of the world and of God, loving relationships are not intrinsic to the being of the universe.
  - b) But the Christian view of God is that God himself is a community; he is a cosmic friendship!
    - i. God's intra-Trinitarian love and friendship is the basis of all reality.
    - ii. All things created were created in the image of this mutual love.
  - c) This means that relationships — deep, personal, intimate — are good in themselves. They are not to be seen as ways to get ahead, as ways just to network and connect to people who can open doors for you. They are ends in themselves.
  - d) Community is what the universe and life is all about.



3. When I forget this, I may forget the rule of servanthood.

- a) Ironically, God's nature to seek his own glory means he is radically "other-centered."
  - i. It is because praise is joy that his seeking his glory is really a way to seek the joy and good of others.
  - ii. It is because he is tri-personal that, though he is seeking his glory, he is always doing so in radically unselfish ways.
  - iii. The Son is willing to lose his glory, even to die, in order to bring glory to the Father (and to us).
  - iv. The Father and the Son were willing to create free-agents even though they knew they would have to bring suffering into the Godhead in order to bring us in.
- b) So here, even in the doctrine of God, we see that the way up is down!
  - i. The way to be lifted up is to stoop and serve others.
  - ii. The way to get love is not to seek it as much as to give it.
- c) Even the cross itself is foreshadowed here in the doctrine of God's glory.
  - i. Jesus didn't save us through ordering us around or through preaching a sermon, but through a deed of self-donation.
  - ii. He lost his glory so we could receive glory and see the glory of God.
- d) We should pattern our lives after the pattern of God's glory but live lives of humble, sacrificial service.

4. When I forget this, I may forget the importance of Christian unity.

- a) One of the aspects of the glory of the Trinity is its perfect unity and oneness of purpose and love.
- b) In John 17, Jesus directly links Christian one-ness to the manifestation of God to the world. The implication is that visible unity is an important way to show the world the glory of God. Christians must do everything possible to show unity across our unavoidable denominational and traditional differences.

5. When I forget this, I may forget how much I am loved by God and in Christ.
  - a) John 17:20ff speaks of how the Father loves us “even as” he loves the Son!
  - b) The work of Christ has begun to bring us into the cosmic, infinite joy of the Godhead.
6. When I forget this, I may forget the importance of the natural world.
  - a) Each facet of the natural world shows us something of the glory of God that we could not otherwise see (Psalm 19:1ff).
  - b) Therefore we cannot simply carve up the natural world and use it in any way we wish.
    - i. We are not to leave the world completely alone; we are to cultivate it as gardeners not as park rangers (Gen. 2:15).
    - ii. And yet all parts of the natural order—the trees and the sea and the sky — are designed to glorify God in their own way (Ps 19: Ps 96:10ff).
  - c) If God created the world to communicate his glory to us for our joy, then we must conserve and appreciate the glory of God in the natural world.
7. When I forget this, I may forget the importance of social justice and of loving all people.
  - a) Since every person was created in the image of God’s glory, every human being must be treated with dignity and worth (cf. Genesis 9:1ff).
  - b) Since the unity yet diversity of the Trinity is the basis for the creation of the world, God wants the various races, classes, and nations to live together in peace and inter-dependence.
  - c) Many of the prophecies of Isaiah tell that when the glory of God returns to the world in fullness it will restore the creation (cf. Isaiah 35:1-2).
  - d) Glory to God in the highest goes with peace on earth (Luke 2:14).

When we make anything but God our ultimate joy or glory, it automatically leads us away from loving all people.

- If the central thing in our life is our family, it will lead us to love our own relatives rather than other families.
- If the central thing in our life is our business, or our political causes, or our nation's interests, in every case it will lead us to love one group of people as opposed to others.
- But if God's glory is the central thing in our life, then we are freed to love all persons and groups of people.
- It is idolatry — giving God's rightful glory to other things such as family, wealth, power and cultural pride — that creates bloodshed and strife.

### **Suggested further study**

J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (IVP, 1973)

<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (IVP/UK, 2000), p.44-45)

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, "The Nature of True Virtue", in *Works: Ethical Writings* (vol. 8), p. 550-551.

<sup>3</sup> C.S.Lewis, "A Word About Praising", in *Reflections on the Psalms* (Harcourt and Brace, 1958), pp.93-97.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Crossway, 2001), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> This paragraph is heavily based on a lecture by George Marsden: "True Virtue and the Context of Creation."



# Gospel Christianity

## What is wrong with us?

### Study 3 | Course 1

Most agree something is wrong with the human race and society, that things are not as they ought to be. The Bible's explanation for what's wrong with the world is *sin*.

### KEY CONCEPT – SIN

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

The most common-sense definition of sin is disobedience to God. But the Biblical view shows this has several dimensions. Here are three basic words for sin in the OT:

**1. Avah** – often translated “*iniquity*” (Ps 51:2a) means to be twisted out of shape.

- Just as when a bone is dislocated from its socket it causes great pain and damage, so a heart not centered on God is filled with deeply distorted beliefs (self-views, God-views, world-views), and drives (inordinate, enslaving and misplaced desires.)
- *“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures... hated and hating.”* (Titus 3:3)

**2. Chatha** – often translated “*sin*” (Ps 51:2b) means to miss the mark or target.

- Sin is the failure to live as God wants — in peaceful harmony with him, others, and the world. Thus “omissions” (against God’s call to love and contentment) are as wrong as “commissions” (against God’s prohibition of lying, stealing, etc.)
- *“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”* (Rom 3:23)
- This is the mark that is missed. We fail to live for God’s glory and instead live for our own.

**3. Pasha** – often translated “*transgression*” (Ps 51:1) means to willfully rebel against someone to whom you owe allegiance. (See Isa 1:2)

- Despite being self-deceived and enslaved (cf. “*avah*”) we are still responsible for our actions.
- Our disobedience to God is a deliberate substitution of our will for his.

- *"For though they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks... they exchanged the glory of the immortal God and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator." (Rom 1:21a, 23a, 25b)*

### Summary

- We sin when we refuse to live for God's glory and instead seek our own glory (importance, significance) in other things.
- Sin is the misery of making anything in your life more important to your hope, identity, meaning, or joy than God.

What is... sin's essence? *Playing God*... acting as if you, and your pleasure, were the end to which all things, God included, must be made to function as a means.

– J.I. Packer <sup>1</sup>

Faith is: that the self... is grounded... in God. Sin is faith's opposite... Sin is... *wanting to be one's own self, instead of a self whose specifications and identity are the outcome of one's relationship to God.*

– Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* <sup>2</sup>

Neither the language of medicine nor of law is adequate substitute for the language of [sin.] Contrary to the medical model, we are not entirely at the mercy of our maladies ...the choice is to enter into the process of repentance... Contrary to the legal model... the essence of sin is not the violation of laws but... a wrecked relationship with God, one another, and the whole created order. "All sins are attempts to fill voids," wrote Simone Weil. Because we cannot stand the God-shaped hole inside of us, we try stuffing it full of all sorts of things, but... only God may fill (it).

– Barbara Brown Taylor <sup>3</sup>

### 1. What statements impressed you and why?

**2. Look at each of the three Hebrew words for sin. What practical mistakes can we make in our thinking about sin if forget or omit any of them.**

We must keep each of these three aspects of sin firmly in our mind or we lose our grasp of all its dimensions.

1. If we forget the word "*avah*," distortion, we might develop a behaviorist model of sin. That is, we might come to believe that sin is almost completely deliberate.
  - We would simply call people to stop sinning without recognizing how self-deceived and how unconscious of their sin people can be.
  - We will tend to focus only on the behavior of sin and not on the inordinate and distorted beliefs and desires that underlie the behavior.
  - We might not look very carefully at our own hearts nor recognize that our biggest sin-problem is probably some area that we are the least aware of.
2. If we forget the word "*chatha*," falling short, we might develop a "legalistic" model of sin. That is, we might come to think of sin in completely negative terms, as violating prohibitions.
  - We would think mainly of sins of commission rather than of our more profound failures to live lives of love, generosity, justice, contentment, and peace.
  - In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus showed clearly that each one of God's commands was not only a prohibition but an invitation.
    - a) The command "thou shalt not kill" is only fulfilled if you are living a life of love.
    - b) The command "thou shalt not steal" is only fulfilled if you are living a life of generosity.
  - If we remember this term for sin it prevents us from being self-righteous and legalistic, since everyone falls short of God's will for how we should be relating to him, to others, and to the world.
3. If we forget the word "*pasha*," rebellion, we might have a strictly medical model of sin.
  - "*Avah*" shows us how deep, interior and complex sin is.
  - "*Chatha*" shows us how impossibly high God's bar is.

- If we had just those two terms we might sit back and say, "Well, no one can help it!" But this third term shows us that God holds us responsible for our behavior.
- This is both bad news and good news.
  - a) It is bad in that we will be held accountable for what we do.
  - b) It is good, however, since responsibility implies the ability to change. There must be hope for change and growth through repentance.

Put all together, we see what a balanced view of sin the Bible has. We see that:

- Sin violates God's authority. It is being your own Master and Savior; it is pasha. This leads to guilt and a debt that must be paid.
- Sin violates God's design. It is building your identity on something besides God; it is avah. This leads to slavery and inner corruption that must be healed.
- Sin violates God's peace. It is ruining God's creation; it is *chatha*. This leads to breakdowns in relationships and to spiritual, social, and cultural disintegration which need to be restored.

**3. Barbara Brown Taylor says that, "The essence of sin is not the violation of laws... but a wrecked relationship." Do you think this is true? Why or why not?**

In the strictest sense, it is not possible to sin without breaking God's Law (cf. 1 John 3:4), as Taylor herself indicates.

- She quotes Weil and says that all sin comes from seeking to fill the "God-shaped hole" that we all have because we have decided to be our own Lords and Masters.
- In other words, the reason that we lie, steal, trample on others, and otherwise disobey God is because we are trying to get our deepest needs met through other things besides God.
- This means that all wrong thoughts, desires and actions come from breaking at least the first of the Ten Commandments, "*Thou shalt have no other gods rather than me.*"
- In other words, to break your relationship with God is to violate at least the first principle of the Law of God.



But Taylor is right in the broader sense. It is just as possible to avoid God as Savior and Lord by keeping and obeying the laws of God as by breaking them.

- The Pharisees were extremely obedient to God's Law. Paul himself said that, as a Pharisee, he was faultless in keeping all the regulations and prohibitions (see Phil 3:6).
- But he was keeping God's Law *in order to save himself*, to earn his own way to heaven. He was, then, obeying the Law in order to be his own Savior.
- In the strict sense of course (as we said above) this breaks the First Commandment. He is putting his ultimate hope and faith in his moral record and his own performance, rather than in God.
- But the point is that all the inner distortions of sin — the self-righteousness, fear, hatefulness, idolatry — can be there even though externally there are hardly any violations of God's laws.
- You can avoid God as Savior as much by keeping the law and being moral as by breaking it and being immoral. Taylor is essentially right.

## BIBLE STUDY #1

Psalm 51:1-5

**What things does David admit here? How does each one contribute to a full understanding of sin?**

1. In verses 3 and 4a, he takes full responsibility for his actions.

- "I know my transgression... I have sinned and done what is evil." By using the most blunt and ugly words — transgression and rebellion (pasha) — he refuses to shift blame.
- Not only does he call his deed "evil" but he confesses that "you are proved right when you speak and justified when you judge" (v.4c). He refuses to blame his upbringing, impulses, hormones, or his environment.
- He is saying, "I deserve judgment." He does not talk of low self-esteem, acting out, addictions, lapses, mistakes, or of his needs.

2. In verse 4a, he admits that his sin was primarily against God.

- “Against you, you only, have I sinned.” This is striking and even shocking. 2 Samuel 11-12 (and the heading of this Psalm) shows us that David is repenting for killing a man and stealing his wife. Yet David says his sin is against “you only.”
- Why? All sin is primarily an exercise of a lordship that we do not have a right to. We act as if we own ourselves, as if we have the knowledge and the right to be our own Savors and Lords.
- Martin Luther said that we don’t ever break commandments 2 through 10 unless we have first and foundationally already decided to break the first commandment.
- The first commandment is “...have no other gods before me.” David could only commit adultery if he either:
  - a) made himself his own God, assuming he was wiser than the God who made the laws, or
  - b) made Bathsheba into an idol more important than God, believing that if he could not have her, he could not be happy.
  - c) Or, he could have broken the 1st commandment in both the “a” and “b” way at the same time.
- In any regard, David had to sin against God first, putting something else in the place of God, in order to sin.

But not only is the sin against God the primary *cause* of all other sin, but it is also the primary reason for sin’s offensiveness. In other words, what makes sin *sin* is that it grieves and offends God.

- If we repent over the consequences of sin (“I hurt people! I won’t be able to rule Israel! I’ve failed my own standards! I will have low self-esteem”), then we are not really repenting of the sin itself. We are only sorry for what has happened to us.
- That is not repentance, but rather self-pity. You will only avoid the sin in the future if it hurts you; the sin itself has not become ugly to you and it has not lost its attractive power over you.
- If, however, you repent over the fact that sin has *broken God’s heart* and dishonored the one to whom you owe everything, then you will begin to find the sin itself heinous and it will lose its power over you.

3. In verse 4b, he uses God's standards alone as the way to judge and weigh his actions.
- "I have... done what is evil in your sight." He has educated his conscience by searching out God's standards and views on the subject.
  - This is critical because the Bible, unlike Jiminy Cricket, does not say, "Always let your conscience be your guide."
    - a) The conscience can be over-scrupulous or under-scrupulous.
    - b) It also can bother us terribly for things that God in his Word says nothing about, while leaving us free over deeds that are evil in God's sight.
  - There are two opposite mistakes we must avoid in repentance.
    - a) On the one hand, we must not allow ourselves to be overly controlled by human opinion or tradition or culture. We must not be rigid and traditional, but rather we should ruthlessly bring the proscriptions and standards of our family, culture and class into examination according to the Word.
    - b) On the other hand, we must not follow our own heart and feelings too much, saying, "It can't be wrong, if it feels so right."
  - Using God's eyes and Word as our standard can free us from being a slave to opinion, and can even free us from our own hearts. If our hearts condemn us where God has said we are free, then we must learn to tell our feelings where to get off.
4. In verse 5, he admits that he now sees the depth of his sin in long-standing character flaws.
- "The new perspective on his sin, as self-assertion against God, opens up a new self-knowledge. This crime, David now sees, was no freak event: it was in character; an extreme expression of the warped creature he had always been, and of the faulty stock he sprang from."  
– Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, p.190-191
  - David is not excusing himself, but rather his comment has the very opposite effect. He is now looking back and re-reading his whole life through the lens of the revelation of his heart in this terrible deed. He now understands himself in ways that he could not before. His denial is over.

## BIBLE STUDY #2

Genesis 3:6-24

**1. What does this passage tell us about all the wrecked relationships sin causes?**1. There is internal shame and guilt.

- “*They realized they were naked*” (v.7). Though the word “shame” is not used here, it is strongly implied, because this verse is the opposite of 2:25, where we read that Adam and Eve had been “*naked and unashamed*.”
- This is the ruin of our psychological relationship with our selves.

2. There is mistrust and fear of others.

- The need for clothing (v.7 – they... made coverings) is much more than a new reticence about sex. Adam and Eve don’t trust each other now. They cannot live with the vulnerability of transparency.
- Every human being, to some degree, is hiding from the human race. We are all desperately seeking to control what others see of us, rather than allowing anyone to see the full truth.
- This is the ruin of personal relationships with others.

3. There is a loss of our relationship to God.

- As soon as God draws near, Adam and Eve hid from God out of a sense of fear (v.10).
- Adam’s answer in v.12 shows that even in the very presence of God, humanity has now become resentful of and hostile to God. Adam says: “The woman you put here with me — she gave me... and I ate...” This is a clear accusation that God is himself to blame for what Adam has done.
- So we see that, just as with other human beings, our relationship with God is not simply one of mistrust, but of anger and hostility. We consider God an enemy.

4. There is a denial of truth in our efforts of self-justification.

- God's first question is general. He asks, essentially: "Why are you in this condition — hiding?"
- Adam's first answer to God completely avoids the real truth — that he has eaten of the tree.
- God's second question is so direct that Adam cannot avoid the truth, but he immediately deflects the responsibility away from himself to Eve.
- She does the same to the serpent. Not only are we afraid and mistrustful of one another (v.7) but we are positively hostile to one another.
- This is the ruin of our mental relationship with the truth. We cannot face the truth about ourselves.

5. There is a breakdown of relationships between groups.

- Whether one holds to a traditional view of male-female roles or not, the curse in 3:16 shows that the domination of wives by their husbands is not the way God created marriage to function. It is a consequence of sin.
- "But he will rule over you" (v.16b) means "instead, he will dominate you." This shows us that sin does not only ruin relationships between human beings as individuals, but it also created divisions between genders, races, nationalities.
- This is the ruin of harmony in society. There is constant "warfare" between the various groups and types of people.

6. There is economic-cultural breakdown.

- In verses 17-19, God indicates that because of sin, our ability to work and build a culture is seriously affected and damaged.
- Work was a good thing, put into Paradise as one of the things human beings need to be completely fulfilled and happy.
- Yet here we see that work becomes "painful toil" (v.17). Work is not a curse, but work has been cursed. Art, science, business, agriculture, education; everything will be frustrating and difficult and will wear us down.

## 7. There is physical breakdown.

- The final thing we see in this passage is that “pain” and “sweat” lead to physical death itself. “Until you return to the ground” (v.19).
- Disease, old age, natural disasters, and death itself are the results of sin. Before the Fall, God ruled over Man who ruled over Nature. Now, we see in v.19, it is “God — over Nature — over Man.”
- The dust of the ground “wins” over us in the end.

**Summary**

It is critical to see how far-reaching the results of sin are.

- We all recognize murder, adultery, and theft as sins and results of the Fall.
- But do we also realize that poverty, mental illness, bad government, poor race relations are also part of the “*groaning of creation*” under sin?
- Adam and Eve were alienated from God In v.8, “*They hid from the Lord.*” This led to alienation
  - a) from one another (v.7, 12-13, 16),
  - b) from themselves (v.7,10),
  - c) and from nature (v.17ff.).
- Spiritual alienation leads to psychological, social, cultural, and even physical alienation.

**2. What hope does the passage suggest?**

Despite the bleakness of the event, God injects a strong note of hope in verse 15.

- God predicts that a descendent of Eve will some day come and battle the serpent who, of course, is Satan.
- What will the outcome be? Eve’s son will be wounded (“*you will strike his heel*”) but Satan will be defeated (“*he will crush your head*”).
- Here is the first prediction of the coming of Jesus. God’s words indicate that Jesus’ coming will undo the work of the serpent — of sin and all the wrecked relationships it causes.
- As we bring Jesus into our lives as Savior and Lord all the wrecked relationships begin to heal.

## READINGS

Read & mark: "?"-Question raised; "!"- Insight helpful

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. In the Bible, shalom means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight* — a rich state of affairs... Human communities would present their racial and regional specialties to other communities in the name of God, in glad recognition that God, too, is a radiant and hospitable community of three persons. In turn, each human being would reflect and color the light of God's presence out of the inimitable resources of his or her own character and essence. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be... We may safely describe evil as any spoiling of shalom, whether physically, morally, spiritually, or otherwise. Sin is the disruption or disturbance of what God has designed... Sin tends to disintegrate both its victims and its perpetrators.

– Cornelius Plantinga <sup>4</sup>

Sin sets up strains in the structure of life which only end in breakdown.

– Derek Kidner <sup>5</sup>

There is no fault which we are more unconscious of ourselves. And the more we have it, the more we dislike it in others. I am talking of Pride or Self-conceit... It is because I want to be the big noise at the party that I am annoyed that someone else is being the big noise... Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind. What you want to get clear is that Pride is *essentially* competitive while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better looking than others... The sexual impulse may drive two men into competition for the same girl. But a proud man will take your girl from you not because he wants her, but just to prove to himself that he is a better man than you.

Nearly all those evils in the world which people put down to greed or selfishness are really far more the result of Pride... It is far more subtle and deadly. Pride can often be used to beat down the simpler vices. Teachers, in fact, often appeal to a boy's pride, or as they call it, self-respect, to make him behave decently. Many have overcome cowardice, or lust, or ill-temper by learning to think that they are beneath their dignity. The devil laughs. He is perfectly content to see you becoming chaste and brave and self-controlled provided he is setting up in you the Dictatorship of Pride — just as he would be

quite content to see [the corns on your foot] cured if he was allowed, in return, to give you cancer. For Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or common sense.

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that — and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison — you do not know God at all. He wants you to be delightedly humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity which has made you unhappy and restless all your life. Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel we are good — above all, that we are better than someone else — I think we may be sure that we are being acted on not by God but by the devil... If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.

– C.S. Lewis <sup>6</sup>

### Application questions

#### 1. Give 4-5 examples of the natural consequences of sin that Kidner and Plantinga talk about.

Plantinga and Kidner speak about the disintegrating power of sin.

- The consequences of sin are always natural. When a doctor tells you must totally change your diet in order to avoid heart trouble she does not need to fine you or put you in jail if you disobey her. You will have a heart attack.
- To disobey her is to violate your own fabric which leads to a breakdown. Her directives were really a set of ways for you to honor the structure of your body.
- So whenever you set yourself up as Lord and disobey God's Law, you are violating the design and fabric of things and you immediately unleash forces of chaos that lead to breakdown and disintegration.
- To be fallen means we are returning back to the dust. The more we sin, the faster that disintegration happens. There are an infinite number of examples.

If you make anything more important than God it leads to psychological fears and insecurity.

- You are never sure that you are "living up" and the things you've built your life on could be taken away from you any time.



- If you refuse to forgive someone who has wronged you, that will lead to social breakdown (the loss of that relationship and relationships with the wrong-doer's supporters) but can also lead to psychological breakdown and even physical breakdown.

## 2. Why is it so important to understand the nature of spiritual pride?

1. Lewis says that it is the most invisible of root sins.
  - You know when you are committing adultery, or stealing, or killing! But you hardly ever see when you are being proud and self-centered. So unless you understand it well it will take you over and you won't know it.
2. Lewis shows us that pride can even (or especially!) grow in the very heart of our moral life. He shows how it is possible to actually increase pride in the heart of your life as you become more self-controlled, honest, courageous, disciplined.
  - You can obey the law of God out of pride, self-salvation and self-righteousness. Indeed, that is quite normal in the world!
  - It is possible to obey God's law out of humble gratitude for salvation but it is also possible to obey God's law out of spiritual pride—in order to save yourself, to get God to do your bidding, and to feel superior to others.
  - It is obvious that the Pharisees were extremely moral and obedient to God's law but all out of pride. This kind of growth in moral behavior is extremely common but spiritually dangerous.
3. Lewis shows us that recognizing and dealing with pride is one of the keys to moving from just being religious to truly knowing God.
  - If you look at "sins" (specific violations of prohibitions) you can feel like you are pretty good and that you don't need much in the way of miraculous free-grace salvation.
  - But pride is "the sin under other sins" that many people don't see. It is the desire to be your own Savior and your own Lord.
  - Pride can be as much the reason for keeping God's law as it can be for violating it. Until we stop looking only at sins and begin looking at our sin — pride, self-centeredness, self-salvation, self-righteousness — we will not see our need for a Savior.
  - Until we see our sin, we can at best be nice, moral, religious people.

**3. Lewis provides a number of tests that can help you detect the presence, location, or even the level of pride in your life. What are they?**

The first test has to do with how much we dislike proud people. He says *"the more we have it ourselves the more we dislike it in others."*

- How do you do with self-centered, boastful, or self-absorbed people? If you can't tolerate them, treat them gently, and enjoy their strengths and gifts, that may be because you are too much in the grip of your own pride.
- Lewis says that it would not annoy you to see someone hogging the spotlight unless you either wish you had the spotlight, or have given up the spotlight unwillingly.

The second test has to do with how relaxed we are about how we look. He says that humility is marked by *"delight"* and *"relief."*

- Pride, by contrast, makes you *"restless"* and always concerned with your dignity, with how you look and how you are treated.
- Humility is not thinking less of yourself so much as it is thinking of yourself less (often) It is *"blessed self-forgetfulness."* You do not focus on yourself or care so much how you are being regarded.
- There obviously is a counterfeit humility that is really a form of self-absorption. Both self-promoters and self-haters are focused on themselves.
- Lewis says that real humility lets you get your mind off of yourself. Your ego doesn't need constant feeding. You don't care that much what people think. Criticism doesn't bother you and complements aren't that important.

The third test is has to do with how proud you *think* you are. Lewis says: *"If you don't think you are conceited, you are very conceited indeed."*

- The humbler you are, the more you see your touchiness, your pride, your self-absorption.
- The prouder you are, the blinder you are to all of that.
- In short — the humble person feels proud, but the proud person feels they are as *"humble as the next guy."*

#### 4. What mistaken thoughts, distorted emotions or wrong practices result when I don't have a Biblical view of sin?

There are, of course, innumerable answers to this question. Let's discuss just two very important ones which are related to one another.

A deep grasp of the Biblical view of sin shows us the complete pervasiveness of sin and the ultimate impossibility of dividing the world into "sinners" and "good" people. (cf. Jesus calling his own disciples "evil" in Luke 11:13.)

- We learn from the Bible that sin is primarily the heart desire of every person to be his or her own Savior and Lord. This is then something that *everyone* is doing all the time.
  - a) People who flout God's moral law are doing this overtly.
  - b) But even moral religious people are trying to be their own Saviors by earning salvation and being good.
  - c) It is just as possible to avoid Jesus as Savior (and be your own Savior) by keeping God's law as by breaking it.
- The ground-motive of sin plays itself out at the root of every person's life in every culture and in every circumstance. In the ultimate sense, then, everyone is equally a sinner in need of Jesus' salvation by grace alone.
- This significantly changes more natural and traditional attitudes toward those who behave in ways that you do not approve.
  - a) The Bible shows us that no particular sin act separates anyone from God.
  - b) Everyone is separated from God naturally and equally regardless of the external form of behavior.
  - c) It is the fundamental motives of self-justification and self-glorification that alienate us from God.
- That goes for everyone from prostitutes to ministers. And those who are saved aren't saved because they are better people; it's all grace.
- So a Biblical doctrine of sin leads us away from superiority, shunning, and exclusion.

A deep grasp of the Biblical view of sin brings us to recognize how difficult it is to use the word "sin" in public and be understood!

- The gospel message tells us that we are saved by Christ's work not by our work. (See Week 5.) But everyone else (even most people in church) believe that Christianity is "you are saved if you live a good life and avoid sin."
- Therefore, when they hear a Christian call something "sin," they believe you are saying:
  - a) these are bad people (and I am good);
  - b) these are people who should be shunned, excluded (and I should be welcomed);
  - c) these are people who God condemns because of this behavior (but I am accepted by God because I don't do that).
- For example, if most people hear you say that people who have sex outside of marriage are sinning, they will immediately believe you look down on them, that you think they are lost because of that behavior, that you are one of the good people who don't do things like that, and so on.
- Even if you don't mean any of that, others will believe you are saying that because they have a completely different grid or paradigm in their minds about how anyone can approach and relate to God.

This is why Christians with a good grasp of the Biblical view of sin will try to avoid public pronouncements on particular behaviors as sinful and will try to get people to hear the radical message of the Bible about the true nature of sin and its universality.

- They will show that people are lost only if ultimately they are too proud to see they are lost and needful of a Savior who saves by sheer grace, just as a drowning person offered a life-preserver will only die if he won't admit he needs it.

**Suggested further study**

Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1995)

<sup>1</sup> J.I.Packer, "Sin" in *God's Words* (IVP, 1981) p.73.

<sup>2</sup> This is taken from Kierkegaard's own words and from the summary of his teaching in the introduction the Penguin Classic. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Penguin, 1989). Translation and Introduction by Alastair Hannay, pp.11, 114.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara B. Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cowley, 2000) pp. 57-67.

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1995) pp. 10, 12, 14, 16, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVP, 1964), p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis, "The Great Sin" in *Mere Christianity* (MacMillan, 1958) pp.94-99.



# Gospel Christianity

## Who is Jesus?

### Study 4 | Course 1

Jesus of Nazareth is the single most influential figure in world history. But who is he?

### KEY CONCEPT – INCARNATION

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

“In the beginning was the Word (Greek: Logos) and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made... And the Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us, and we beheld his glory.” (John 1:1-3, 14)

The [Greeks] understood *logos* to be the rational principle by which everything exists, and which is the essence of the rational human soul. As far as they were concerned, there is no god other than *logos*, and all that exists has sprung from the seminal *logoi*, seeds of this *logos*... But there is Old Testament background to the term *logos*. It could be argued that John is referring to the *Torah* (roughly, the law, truth, or teaching of God.) Thus *logos* would be rich in meaning for Jewish readers, and yet it would resonate in the minds of readers with entirely pagan backgrounds. But whatever they had understood the term to mean, [John] was forcing them into fresh thought.

At this point [John 1:14] the incarnation, the ‘in-fleshing’ of the [uncreated Word, Jesus] is articulated in the boldest way. If the Evangelist had said only that the eternal word ‘assumed manhood’ or ‘adopted the form of a body,’ the reader steeped in the popular dualism of the Hellenistic world might have missed the point. But John is unambiguous, almost shocking in the expressions he uses: *the Word became flesh*...

This is the supreme revelation. If we are to know God, neither rationalism nor mysticism will suffice. Even the revelation of antecedent Scripture cannot match this revelation, as the Hebrews affirms: *“In the past God spoke... through the prophets... but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”* (Heb.1:1-2) The Word, God’s very Self-expression, who was both with God and was God, became flesh: he donned our humanity, save only our sin. God chose to make himself known, finally and ultimately, in a real, historical man.

– D.A.Carson <sup>1</sup>

To the Greeks the “*logos*” was the purpose or meaning of existence. To the Jews the “*logos*” was God’s Word — the truth or moral absolutes at the foundation of all reality. In the beginning of his gospel John addresses both world-views when he speaks of a divine “Word” that was the source and foundation of all creation. But then he says something that floods the banks

and bursts the boundaries of all human categories. He tells Jews that the truth and self-expression of God has become human. He tells Greeks that the meaning of life and all existence has become human. Therefore, only if you know this human being will you find what you hoped to find in philosophy or even in the God of the Bible. The difference [between any other great figure and Jesus] is the difference between an example of living and one who is the life itself.

– Charles Williams <sup>2</sup>

**1. What statements impressed you and why?**

**2. John challenges both the pagan and the Jewish world views with the doctrine of the incarnation. How does the incarnation challenge today's reigning world-views?**

The incarnation challenges the empiricist view so influential in modern times.

- This world-view denies either that there is any eternal, supernatural world or at least it denies that the supernatural can ever break in and violate natural laws in the form of miracles.
- The incarnation, however, is the Great Miracle.

On the other hand, the incarnation challenges the "post-modern" view that is also prevalent today.

- This is more a mood than a coherent philosophy, but it is the view that all depictions of reality are socially constructed to serve the purpose of the dominant group, that there is no such thing as "Truth" at all.
- The incarnation, however, teaches that there is an absolute Truth and it has become a human being.

Finally, the incarnation challenges the modernized versions of religion which consist almost entirely of ethical behavior.



- In this view: “It doesn’t matter so much what you believe — all religions basically believe in the same God. What really matters is that you are a good, loving, and honest person.”
- This very prevalent view makes God a very vague and generally impersonal being. God is perceived only as a mysterious life-force or the First Cause of the universe, but not as a person we can know and relate to.
  - a) Often, in a sincere effort to be gender-sensitive, many refuse to refer to God as “he” or “she” but only in a generic way.
  - b) Often the influence of eastern spirituality leads many to work on yoga meditation rather than verbal prayer-communication in order to “touch the divine.”
- But the incarnation tells us that we have “a palpable God” — one who can be known, talked to, listened to, served, and loved. The incarnation gives us the most personal God in the face of modern efforts to de-personalize the deity.

### 3. How does the incarnation shed light on claims that Jesus is the only mediator, the only way, to reach God? (cf. John 14:6; 1 Timothy 2:5)

There is very strong opposition to the idea that Jesus is the only way to know and reach God. This is seen as extremely narrow-minded.

- But the claim that Jesus is the unique way to God is based on a prior claim that he is God Incarnate.
- If he is the only God-incarnate, then certainly he and the faith he founded would have to be at least a vastly superior revelation of God over any other.
  - a) No other founder of a major world religion claimed to be God.
- That means, by definition, Jesus would have to be the unique way to God if he is who he claimed to be.

For example, let us compare Christianity and Islam.

- Certainly they have much in common, but if Christians are right about Jesus Christ *being* God, then Muslims are failing in a serious way to love God as he’s revealed himself to be.
- If, however, Muslims are right about Jesus *not* being God but only a prophet, then Christians are failing in a serious way to love God as he’s revealed himself. Then Christians have distorted the perception of God in the extreme. (That is, of course, what Muslims believe.)

- So Christians do not choose to believe that Jesus is the unique way to God. Once they believe he is God in the flesh they simply have to see him as the only way to know and serve God truly.

## BIBLE STUDY #1

Matt 9:2-3; 11:27; 28:18-20; John 5: 21-23; 8:52-59; 20:28-29

**How do these words and deeds of Jesus tell us about his own self-identity and in what ways?**

### Matt 9:2-3

- When Jesus assumes the authority to forgive sins, the teachers of the law very correctly believed he was claiming a right that only God has.
  - a) Common sense tells us that you can only forgive a sin if it is against you. (If Joe punches Jack in the nose, I can't step up and say, "Joe, I forgive you for punching Jack in the nose." Only Jack can do that.)
  - b) So when Jesus forgives this man's sin, he is saying (implicitly) that all sins are against him.
  - c) Only God can claim that all sins are against him, since he made the world and everything in it and all sins are against his creation.
  - d) So this is Jesus claiming divine prerogatives.

### Matt 11:27

- When Jesus says, "*All things have been committed to me*," he makes the staggering claim that he has both the right and the power to control everything that exists.
- When Jesus says, "*No one knows the Father but the Son*," he is making a remarkable claim to have complete knowledge of the Father in a way that no one else in the universe does.
  - a) When he says, "No one knows the Father," he cannot mean that no one has any knowledge or any relationship to God.
  - b) Many people know God in a limited but personal way so Jesus must be claiming absolute knowledge of God.
  - c) He is saying, "Compared to the exhaustive way I know the Father, no one knows him at all."

- d) But how could any mortal human claim to completely know the infinite God?
- The most startling statement however is: *"No one knows the Son but the Father."*
  - a) This means that just as he alone is capable of knowing the Father, so the Father alone is capable of knowing him!
  - b) It is an implicit but remarkable claim to have an equal level of being with the Father.

Matt 28:20

- In this famous statement Jesus assumes attributes that only God has.
  - a) Omnipotent – "All authority in heaven and earth is given to me."
  - b) Eternal – "I am with you... even to the end of the age."
  - c) Omnipresent – He tells all his disciples that no matter where any of them are, "I will be with you always."

John 5:21-23

- Jesus claims to be the source of life (v.21) and the final judge of all the earth and everyone in it (v.22.)
- Obviously, he is claiming powers and rights that only God has but to top it off he insists that he is owed equal honor with the Father.
  - a) The first commandment demands that no one be given worship except God alone (Exodus 20:2-3), yet here Jesus claims it! (See John 20:28-29 below.)

John 8:52-59

- Jesus makes an astounding statement when he says that he existed before Abraham. That means at least that he is thousands of years old — hardly an ordinary human being!
- But he goes further. He says, *"Before Abraham was, I am."* (v.58)
  - a) The verb form is deliberately inappropriate. He does not say, as would be proper, "Before Abraham was, I was."
  - b) By saying "I AM," he is claiming title to the divine name that God gave to Moses out of the burning bush when the Lord said, *"Say to the Israelites: 'I AM has sent me to you.'"* (Exodus 3:14)

- c) When the listeners hear Jesus taking on the personal name of God, they try to stone him (v.59.)
- d) Stoning was the penalty for blasphemy (Lev 24:16). They recognized that Jesus was saying things only God could say.

#### John 20:28-29

- In the book of Revelation, John repeatedly falls at the feet of an angel in worship. Each time the angel forbids it, saying that he is simply a fellow created being and is not to be worshipped. (See Rev 19:10; 22:9.)
- And of course the first of the 10 commandments (and arguably the basis for all the rest) is that we are to worship no being but the uncreated God himself.
- But Jesus simply accepts Thomas' worship! This reveals his understanding that he is not a created being, but the God who alone is worthy of worship.

## BIBLE STUDY #2

Mark 1:2-4 (cf. Is 40:3-5); Acts 20:28; Colossians 2:9-10; Hebrews 1:1-3

### **How do these claims of Jesus' followers tell us who they believed him to be?**

#### Mark 1:2-3 (Is 40:3-5)

- Mark asserts that John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus, is the "*messenger*" predicted by Isaiah 40:3-5.
- But Isaiah says that the one who the messenger is paving the way for is Yahweh, "*the LORD*" of glory!
- So the gospel writer Mark is saying in the most unmistakable terms that in Jesus the Lord God himself has come.

Acts 20:28

- Luke records Paul speaking of the church which “*God... bought with his own blood.*”
- But the only person who shed blood, on the cross, was Jesus. This means that Jesus was God, so that his blood was God’s blood.
- This shows us that both Paul and his friend Luke believed in the full deity of Christ in no uncertain terms.

Colossians 2:9-10

- To make Paul’s view unmistakably clear, we have the sweeping claim of these verses. This declares the divinity of Christ in the most unmistakable terms.
- He does not simply claim that Jesus had divine substance in him, which might make him like eastern avatars who were great expressions of the divine spirit.
- Paul says that in Christ “*all the fullness of the Deity dwells in bodily form.*”
  - a) Paul could have used a Greek word that simply means divine qualities or godlike-ness. Instead he uses the actual word for God (*theos*), which means the undivided essence of God in all its fullness is in Jesus.
  - b) We cannot even say that Jesus has part of the divine nature, but rather all of it is in him.
- It is because Jesus has the fullness of God (v.9) that he can bring us to fullness of life (v.10.)

Hebrews 1:1-3

- The writer to the Hebrews tells us at least three things about Jesus.
  - a) He tells us that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God, superior even to the inspired prophecies and writings of the Scriptures.
  - b) He tells us that Jesus is the “exact” representation of God’s glory and being. The idea here is of an exact mirror image, absolutely equal to the reflected object in every way — size, shape, brightness, clarity.
  - c) Jesus holds the entire universe together; he sustains it with the “word of his power.”

## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

The incarnation means that for whatever reason God chose to let us fall into a condition of being limited, to suffer, to be subject to sorrows and death — he has nonetheless had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine... He himself has gone through the whole of human experience — from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death... He was born in poverty and... suffered infinite pain — all for us — and thought it well worth his while.

– D. Sayers <sup>3</sup>

[The Incarnation] meant a laying aside of glory; a voluntary restraint of power; an acceptance of hardship, isolation, ill-treatment, malice and misunderstanding; finally, a death... The “Christmas spirit”...should mean the reproducing in human lives of the temper of him who for our sakes became poor...[It] does not shine out in the... snob who leaves the sub-middle-class sections of the community to get on by themselves. The Christmas spirit is [rather] that of those who, like their Master, live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor — spending and being spent — to do good to others — and not just their own friends.

– J.I. Packer <sup>4</sup>

He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. Now let us get this clear. Among Pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was part of God, or one with God: there would be nothing very odd about it. But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world Who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else. And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips... I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend

to... Jesus was never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He did not produce that effect on any of the people who actually met Him. He produced three effects — Hatred, Terror, and Adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval.

– C.S. Lewis <sup>5</sup>

He says in the clearest voice we have the sentence that mankind craves... *the Maker of all things loves and wants me...* In no other book our culture owns can we see a clearer graph of that need, that tall enormous radiant arc — fragile creatures made by God's hand, hurled into space, then caught at last by a man in some ways like ourselves.

– Reynolds Price <sup>6</sup>

### Application questions

#### 1. What practical difference does it make to you that your Savior is not only human but God?

The following are only some of the wonderful and innumerable implications of the fact that Jesus Christ is God himself.

1. If Jesus is God, he is not simply to be admired and respected but to be worshipped, adored and delighted in.
  - a) The purpose of our lives is to behold his glory and beauty (John 17:24) and that certainly means more than to believe in him or even to obey him.
  - b) He is the ultimate object of worship (2 Corinthians 3:18). He is to be reveled in, savored and rejoiced in.
  - c) Jesus is God. Therefore, he should be the ultimate beauty and satisfaction for our heart.
2. If Jesus is God, he is to be absolutely obeyed and given the central priority of our lives.
  - a) Jesus' claim to be God polarizes the only possible response to him, as C. S. Lewis noted.
  - b) No one can respond to him casually or moderately. If he is not who he said he is, he should be hated or utterly ignored.

- c) If he is who he said he is then he should be adored completely. We should center our lives entirely on him.
- d) Jesus is the Creator, Almighty God. He is not someone you can ask into your life as an assistant or consultant — he must be Lord. Jesus is God — and therefore he should be the pre-eminent concern of our choices, the ultimate Lord of over our wills.

3. If Jesus is God, his salvation is of infinite value.

- a) His sufferings were of infinite value. His blood was shed as a ransom (Mark 10:45) to pay for our sins. But his blood was the blood of God (Acts 20:28)! Imagine how valuable that is!
- b) Also, he was forsaken by the Father (Matthew 27:46) as a way to take the penalty we deserved (2 Cor. 5:21; 2 Thess 2:9).
  - i. But the Father and Son knew one another from all eternity and had perfect love for each other.
  - ii. So the experience of the loss that Jesus experienced on the cross would have been infinitely greater than that which any other being would experience.
- c) The deity of Christ means that his salvation is super-abundantly sufficient for us. He is able to save “to the uttermost” (Heb. 7:25 – King James Version). No sin is too great to be forgiven; no corruption is too great to be healed.
- d) Jesus is God — and therefore he should bring complete rest and assurance to our consciences.

Actually, the incarnation points to a truth that the cross will make clear, namely, that our salvation is by sheer grace.

- In every other religion the founder is a human being sent by God to show us what to do to be saved.
- But Jesus is God come himself. Now if God only needed to inform us what to do for salvation, he could have sent a prophet!
- His personal coming means he will not just tell us what we have to do to be saved, but will do for us all that we cannot do ourselves.
  - a) He will live the obedient life we should have lived but did not.
  - b) He will die to pay the penalty for the disobedient life we shouldn’t have lived but did.
  - c) He came himself to accomplish our salvation for us.



4. If Jesus is God, then there is endless hope for the world and for you.
  - a) As we will see later in this series, the Bible tells us that Jesus brought “the kingdom of God.” That means that Jesus, the true King, has returned and has begun to put the world right with his power.
  - b) Right now, that healing is only partial but some day all deformity, decay, sin, disease and imperfection will be wiped away.
  - c) This means we live with infallible hope. (See Romans 8:18-25.)
    - i. Whatever problem we face — whether disease or injustice or some other suffering — eventually God’s power will triumph over it.
    - ii. Weeping may remain for the night, but joy comes with the morning (Ps 30:5.)
  - d) Jesus is God. Therefore it means God has landed! The ideal has penetrated the real and is transforming it into his likeness.
  - e) The world is destined for joy sooner or later.

## 2. What practical difference does it make to you that your Savior is not only God but man?

1. If God became truly human, we have a remarkable resource to face pain and suffering (as Dorothy Sayers tells us in her quote above.)
  - a) The Bible has much to say that throws light on the reasons for, and the meaning of, suffering and evil in the world.
  - b) However, the Bible never gives an exhaustive answer to the big question of “Why?” But Christianity offers something just as valuable.
  - c) Most people who have gone through grief and bereavement know that what they need most of all is not intellectual answers for why their loved one died. What they need most of all is the personal presence of their friends. That’s what we really need to face it.
  - d) The doctrine of the incarnation, then, gives us a resource for suffering that no other religion gives us. For only the Christian God descended into the world and became vulnerable and suffered and died himself.
  - e) He is God-with-us (Matt 1:23). He gives us his personal presence in our suffering.
    - i. Only Christianity adds courage to God’s list of attributes. Among all the “gods” presented by the great world faiths, only God-in-Christ knows what its like to experience hunger, danger, injustice, rejection, torture, suffering, and death.

- f) There is another side to the incarnation and the suffering of Jesus. If Jesus is not God, then the cross is an act of divine cruelty rather than an action of self-sacrificial love.
- 
- 2. If God became truly human, then matter matters.
    - a) The incarnation means God assumed a physical body and entered the material world. Many philosophies of the world see the material world either as:
      - i. an illusion (like eastern religions)
      - ii. or as polluted and intrinsically evil (like the Greeks)
      - iii. or as the product of random chance and doomed to final extinction in the death of the universe (like many modern secularists.)
    - b) But the incarnation means that God believes the material world to be a good thing.
    - c) And the resurrection shows us that he intends to redeem the physical world as well as the spiritual.
    - d) This means that fighting disease, injustice, and hunger is on God's agenda along with saving souls and forgiving sins.
    - e) This also means that the material world is a good thing and it is God's will for us to enjoy it.
- 
- 3. If God became truly human, then Christians should not be too impressed with glitz, physical beauty, status, and power.
    - a) The incarnation means that God was willing to empty himself of his glory and power and live humbly as a servant.
    - b) Philippians 2:6ff tells us that Jesus did not empty himself of his deity, but he emptied himself of his glory (cf. John 17:1-5.) That means he became extremely ordinary in appearance.
    - c) As J. I. Packer's quote above shows us, the incarnation should mean that Christians do not go on appearances and do not prefer the more privileged and elite circles.
    - d) In the incarnation God moved out of the very best neighborhood into a slum! He associated with "undesirables." The incarnation should mean the end of our snobbery.

**Suggested further study**

Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995)<sup>7</sup>

1 D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1999), p.126-127.

2 Quoted in Phillip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995), p. 258.

3 Dorothy Sayers, "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged" in *Creed or Chaos?* (Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1949.)

4 J.I. Packer, "God Incarnate" in *Knowing God* (IVP, 1972.)

5 C.S. Lewis, "The Shocking Alternative" in *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1952.)

6 Quoted in Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995), p.269.

7 Yancey's book does not put much stress on the deity of Jesus until the last chapter, because his concern is to depict the real flesh-and-blood Jesus of the New Testament texts. But if Yancey is read along with Packer's *Knowing God* and Stott's *The Cross* the student will get a good balanced picture.



# Gospel Christianity

## Why did Jesus die?

### Study 5 | Course 1

Many people who believe in God, sin and the deity of Christ nonetheless get stuck over the question: "But why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn't God just forgive us?"

### KEY CONCEPT – CROSS

Read & mark: "?" – Question raised; "!" – Insight helpful

*"At-one-ment"* means removing barriers to create a new relationship. The Bible reveals what this means by showing us five aspects of the cross.

#### **Sacrifice**

- Sin is impurity, a defilement that makes us unfit for community. This creates shame and a sense of being unacceptable.
- But on the cross Jesus was shamed and excluded (Matt 27:46; Heb 13:11-13) so that we could be purified and cleansed from sin (Heb 1:3, 9:13-14).
- So the cross removes the shame-barrier.

#### **Debt**

- Sin is an obligation (cf. Matt 6:12). When we cannot pay our debts this entails slavery (in ancient cultures) or bankruptcy (today).
- But on the cross Jesus paid a ransom (Mark 10:45) so that we could be redeemed out of bondage (1 Tim 2:6; 1 Cor 6:20).
- So the cross removes the debt-barrier.

#### **Battle**

- Sin is an evil force of self-centeredness and power-accrual that works in the world and in our hearts.
- But on the cross Jesus unmasks and disarms evil powers (Col.1:12-14, 2:14-15; Jn 12:31-33) by a complete reversal, through self-sacrifice and service (1 Cor 1:18-31).
- So the cross removes the power of evil over us.

**Relationship**

- Sin is a broken relationship, refusing God his rightful centrality in our hearts. God is alienated from us and us from him (Rom 5:10).
- But on the cross Jesus removes God's anger from us (Heb 9:5; Eph 2:3-5; 1 Jn 2:1-2) and turns our hearts to him as Mediator and Advocate.
- So the cross removes the hostility-barrier.

**Law**

- Sin is a violation of God's righteous character and law. This creates guilt.
- But on the cross Jesus stood in our legal place (Is 53:11, 12; cf. Lk 22:37) took the judgment we deserved (1 Pet 3:18; Rom 3:21-26; Gal 3:13) so we can get the treatment he deserved (2 Cor 5:21).
- So the cross removes the guilt-barrier.
- Some metaphors have more to do with the objective satisfaction of something within God that opens the way for our acceptance.
- Some have more to do with the subjective revelation of God's character to us that changes the way we live.
- No one metaphor alone conveys the richness of all that the cross achieved.
- But running through all of them is a single theme-the self-substitution of God.
  - a) God himself supplies what we should have provided.
  - b) He is excluded, bankrupted, taken prisoner and defeated.
  - c) He receives God's wrath and judgment-in our stead-so we can be accepted and liberated.

"The righteous, loving Father humbled himself to become in and through his only Son's flesh, sin and a curse for us, in order to redeem us without compromising his own character. The biblical gospel of atonement is of God satisfying himself by substituting himself for us... The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone."

– John Stott <sup>1</sup>

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?****2. What are the advantages of the diversity of Biblical metaphors for the cross and the atonement?**

1. This diversity gives testimony to the richness of meaning in Christ's cross and at the same time gives us resources for getting a deep and rich understanding of what that meaning is.
  - a) The diversity of metaphor shows us that the wonder of Jesus' death cannot be confined to any one simple definition or analogy.
  - b) But the various analogies enable us to spend all of our lives thinking and meditating on it and getting new insights, comforts, and applications.
  - c) (For more on the range of applications, see the "Application" questions after the Bible studies below.)
2. This diversity equips believers in any culture to understand and communicate the meaning of Christ's cross. In every culture some of these metaphors will resonate more than others.
  - a) In Africa, Jesus' death is often first grasped as a disarming of evil powers (the "Battle" metaphor.)
  - b) In Asia, Jesus' death is often first grasped as a covering of our shame and making us clean and acceptable (the "Sacrifice" metaphor.)
  - c) In individualistic cultures, the metaphor of "Debt" often resonates the most.
  - d) The diversity of metaphors means that the cross can make sense and transform lives in any cultural setting.
3. This diversity touches not only a range of cultures but a range of personalities and temperaments.

- a) Those of us who feel shame and humiliation may more quickly be touched by the depiction of Jesus identifying with the excluded and the shamed and suffering outside the gate.
  - b) Those who feel troubled by the guilt of some particular sin or sins may be more quickly helped by the metaphor of the law-court and the imputation of Jesus' righteousness to us.
  - c) Those who have been in the grips of the worldly pursuit of power, wealth and beauty may have the "spell broken" by a depiction of the God who emptied himself of all power and wealth and thus won the world.
  - d) Those who are addicted may find freedom in the beauty of Jesus dying to ransom them from their slavery.
  - e) Those who feel directly under the anger of God can be shown that, through Christ, that anger has been taken away.
4. Upon reflection, this diversity reveals its underlying unity. The one theme underlying all is the self-substitution of God.
- a) In the "sacrifice" metaphor Jesus is our sacrifice — he is cursed, rejected, excluded so that we can be cleansed, purified, and brought to God.
  - b) In the "battle" metaphor Jesus is our champion — he battles the forces of darkness and so we can triumph over them.
  - c) In the "debt" metaphor Jesus is our payment — he is enslaved and spent so we can go free.
  - d) In the "relationship" metaphor, Jesus is our Mediator and Advocate — he stands in our place and represents us before God.
  - e) In the "law" metaphor, Jesus is our punishment — he takes the condemnation so we can receive honor.
  - f) It is obvious how all of these metaphors are only different aspects of the fundamental reversal and exchange of Jesus substituting himself for us and receiving what we deserved, so we can receive what he deserved.

**3. Why is it not just advantageous but absolutely necessary to keep in mind the diversity of Biblical metaphor for the atonement?**

As we noted above, the strength of the Biblical metaphors is that some will almost always resonate more than others with a particular culture or personality.



- But it must be kept in mind that the different metaphors are interdependent and none of them must be ignored even when they don't seem to fit or resonate.
- Why would Jesus' death liberate us from the demonic "powers and principalities" (Col 2:15) and show up the foolishness of worldly pride in power and wisdom (1 Cor 1:18-33) unless it also pardoned us and removed our legal condemnation (Rom 3:21-26)?

In particular, we must make sure that we do not choose the more subjective metaphors for Jesus' death over the objective ones. We live in a culture that likes the more subjective metaphors explaining Jesus' death.

- For example, we like hearing that Jesus' death shows God's willingness to identify with us in our suffering and how much he loves us.
- We like hearing that Jesus' death unmasks the evil power of Selfishness and Pride and shows us the way of service to others.
- We prefer to think of the cross being a means to change something in us (a subjective effect) — turning our hearts to God.

But we do not appreciate Biblical talk about the more objective reasons for Jesus' death.

- We do not like talk of an angry God whose wrath must be appeased, or of objective guilt and condemnation that must be removed.
- The trouble is that if Jesus died strictly to change something in us and not to satisfy something in God, then his death ultimately makes no sense.

"Imagine a boy and a girl, walking along a river bank, in love. The boy says to the girl: 'I love you and to show how much I love you, I'm going to jump into this river and drown.' But [that's] irrational... In order to prove love, the loved one must benefit from the dying in some genuine way... If, however, the girl were drowning in the river, and the boy said, 'I love her, and I will dive in, risk drowning, and rescue her,' that would make sense. Unless there is some [objective] benefit coming to the girl as a result of his dying, it is nonsense to talk about his death being an example of love." <sup>2</sup>

In short, if Jesus did not have to die because of some objective, dire peril that we were in, then his death is nothing but a suicide and no real exhibition of love at all.

- If he did not have to die to procure forgiveness and pardon — if there was no objective need for it — then there can be no subjective impact on us because his death isn't really warranted.

On the other hand, it is possible to focus so much on the objective aspects that we learn only about the individual benefits of the cross, such as personal forgiveness, pardon and adoption into God's family.

- But the other, more subjective and corporate metaphors show us how the cross becomes a paradigm for sacrificial living, for identification with the suffering and the rejected, for loving our enemies, and so on.

## BIBLE STUDY

Romans 3:21-26

### 1. vv.21-25 What can we learn from these verses about what this "righteousness from God" is and how we acquire it?

#### What it is

1. The word "right" refers to a legal condition, namely, to have no liabilities or claims against you. To be "right with God" would mean to be in a condition of complete obedience, to have no liabilities before God because you've fulfilled all your obligations to him. So righteousness is a legal standing that is the result of perfect behavior.
2. The phrases "from" (v.21 and 22) and "a gift" (v.24) and "apart from the law" (v.21) tell us that this legal standing is received, not earned. In other words, the "perfect behavior" that results in this legal standing is not our perfect behavior, but that of someone else. Look at 3:20, where Paul talks about being "righteous in his sight."
3. Therefore, to receive this righteousness is to be declared righteous, to be treated or to be seen as perfectly righteous by God. It is received, not earned. It does not come because of any merit in us at all. [Note: The word "righteousness" in v.21 and the word "justify" throughout the rest of the passage are all the same word — dikaiosune. To be "just" or "justified" is exactly the same as receiving God's righteousness. To be justified is to have a record of merit; it is the opposite of "guilty," which is to have a record of wrongdoing.]

#### How it is received

1. It is by faith in Christ, not by faith in general. Paul says it is not faith in general or faith in God in general, but faith "in Jesus Christ" (v.22) that brings the righteousness.

2. It is by faith in Christ's work on the cross, not by general admiration of him. Paul is even more specific in vv.24 and 25. We become righteous "through faith in his blood."
3. Some people say, "I believe in Jesus" but they mean a general admiration of him, and belief in him as an example, or even belief in him as a help in time of need. But that is not saving faith.
4. The faith that brings this righteousness is a specific trust in the work of Christ as being the basis for the legal standing we receive from God.

**2. vv.24-26 Why does God only justify through his atoning sacrifice? Why can't God just forgive us?**

The word "through" in verses 24 and 25 shows that there is a barrier between God and us when it comes to forgiveness. Only the blood of Christ creates a door "through" that barrier; only "through" Jesus death can God give us this gift.

During this century especially, it has been commonly taught that because God is love, all he has to do is merely say or pronounce that we are forgiven.

- The reasoning goes this way: "If my child has done something wrong and says, 'I'm sorry,' well, I simply say, 'That's OK' and we are reconciled. Why can't God just do the same? Why is there a need for Jesus' death?"
- On this theory, Jesus only comes into the world to tell us God loves us, and that his death on the cross is merely an example of sacrificial love designed to move us. But here we see what that barrier is — *"his justice."* The death of Christ was necessary to satisfy his justice.
- The problem with the illustration of the parent and the child is that the relationship depicted is too simplistic. God's relationship with us is more complex.
- He is not only the Fatherly one who loves us (he wants to justify us), but he is also the judge and king of the universe.

"Once in a courtroom I heard a person being sentenced for a crime... On the one hand, a crime had been committed, and the person had to pay... Just as the judge was giving the sentence, a middle-aged man suddenly broke into racking sobs. He was clearly the father of the person on trial... this was somebody's child grown up, a child still adored and treasured by a father. Even the judge paused, but he had his job to do and resumed sentencing. The judge's job is to sentence. The parent's heart is to stand in for the child."

– Rebecca Pippert

"[You say] you can't conceive of a God who would ever punish anyone — that wouldn't be loving. But you have to understand God's [justice]. If I backed into the door of your new car out in the parking lot, and we went to court, and the judge said, 'That's no problem, Bill didn't really mean it,' you'd be up in arms. You'd want justice. If you went to a Cubs game, and Sutcliffe threw a strike down the middle of the plate, and the ump said, 'Ball four,' and walked in a run, you'd be out there killing the ump, because you want justice. [You] hear that and say, 'I guess you're right. I wouldn't want a God who wasn't just.' But before you say, 'Rah, rah for a just God,' let me tell you some of the implications. That means he metes out justice to you."

– Bill Hybels

**Note:** Paul says that God had left sins committed before Christ "unpunished" (v.25) but that now the death of Christ demonstrates his justice. Most commentators believe this means God in his patience simply deferred payment on sins before the coming of Jesus. God accepted those who repented and trusted in his mercy — but he accepted them on the basis of the future work of Christ. In his *forbearance*, he received them *in lieu* of Christ's work.

### 3. vv.25-26 How can Jesus' "atoning sacrifice" make God both "just" AND "the one who justifies" those who believe?

Here Paul uses the word *hilastrion*: "God presented him as a *hilastrion*" The NIV translates this as "sacrifice of atonement," while the King James Version says, "propitiation."

- "Propitiation" means the pacifying or turning away of someone's wrath. It means that God's justice, or God's wrath (they are essentially the same thing) had to be turned away by a payment of the penalty for sin. Jesus' sacrificial death pacified the wrath of God.
- There are many who object to the concept that Jesus died as our substitute because of its implications that God is an angry God who has to be appeased with blood. This sounds too much like the bloodthirsty gods of antiquity who demanded human sacrifice to feel properly honored. But consider the following.

"Paris had carried off Princess Helen to Troy. The Greek expeditionary force had taken ship to recover her, but was held up half-way by persistent contrary winds. Agamemnon, the Greek general, sent home for his daughter and ceremonially slaughtered her as a sacrifice, to mollify the evidently hostile gods... [Why, then, does] the idea of propitiation — of averting God's anger by

an offering — run right through the Bible [?] In the Old Testament, it underlies the prescribed rituals of the sin-offering... In the New Testament, the 'propitiation' word group appears... in Rom 3:21-26, Heb 2:17, I Jn 2:1, and I John 4:8-10... [But] in paganism, man propitiates his gods, and religion becomes a form of commercialism and, indeed, of bribery. In Christianity, however, God propitiates His wrath by his own action. God presented him as a propitiation... (Rom 3:25)" — J.I. Packer

"The doctrine of the propitiation is precisely this — that God loved the objects of his wrath so much that he gave his own son to the end that he by his blood should make provision for the removal of his wrath."

— John Murray

To complain that the Biblical doctrine of substitution is primitive is to miss the point that the gospel teaches the *self*-substitution of God.

- The Biblical doctrine of the cross is not about human beings trying to appease a begrudging, unwilling god, but about the Lord himself coming and voluntarily putting forth himself as the substitutionary payment <sup>3</sup> (God was himself *in Christ* reconciling the world to himself; 2 Cor 5:18-19). This is the very *opposite* of the blood-thirsty gods of primitive religion.
- However, on the other hand, this teaching on the death of Christ does assume there is real evil and real guilt and real divine, transcendent justice.
- While ancient people did not understand the grace and love of God, modern people do not grasp the justice and holiness of God. So the substitutionary death of Christ challenges both ancient and modern views of God and the moral order.
  - a) Modern people don't believe in the depth and reality of spiritual evil and guilt. They don't see that the holy justice of God *must* be honored.
  - b) On the other hand, ancient people had no concept of a God so loving and gracious that he would come and make the perfect payment *himself*.

The wonder of the cross is that, in the very same stroke,

- a) it satisfies both the love of God (that aspect of his nature that seeks our justification)
- b) and the justice of God (that aspect of his nature that demands the punishment of sin).

Therefore he is just and yet he can justify because, having punished Jesus in our stead, he can forgive us freely.

The cross does not represent a compromise between God's wrath and love; it does not satisfy each one half-way. Rather, it satisfies each fully and in the very same action.

- On the cross the wrath and love of God are both vindicated, they are both demonstrated, they are both expressed completely, and they both shine out and are utterly fulfilled.
- When Paul says that the gospel "*upholds the law*" (v.31) he is saying the law of God is still "there" — it must be satisfied for anyone to stand in God's presence.
- Yet, in the case of those who believe in Christ, it has been.

## READINGS

Read & mark: "?" – Question raised; "!" – Insight helpful

The narrative context of [Jesus' teaching on the cross in Mark 10:45] features a bid for recognition and honor, in the form of requests for the two primary seats of honor... Rome was unified not only by one emperor but also by a political order based on the ethics of patronage... Clients were bound to their patrons and often had clients of their own... with everyone ultimately indebted to the emperor, who had a client status with the gods themselves... Against such a world order, Jesus insisted that status must be measured [not by who owed you but] by one's role as a servant... and that service was to be given to those of lower status... Jesus opposed the Roman order at the most fundamental level, substituting for the pervasive worldview... a way of being in the world that took as its starting point the [grace] of God...

– J. Green and M. Baker <sup>4</sup>

Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without overcoming this double exclusion — without transposing the enemy from the sphere of the monstrous... into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness. When one knows [as the cross demonstrates] that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is free to rediscover that person's humanity and imitate God's love for him. And when one knows [as the cross demonstrates] that God's love is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself in the light of God's justice and so rediscover one's own sinfulness.

– Miroslav Wolf <sup>5</sup>

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;  
In all the universe we have no place.

Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?  
Lord Jesus, by thy scars we know thy grace.

The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak;  
They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne;

But to our wounds only God's wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds, but thou alone.

– Edward Shillito <sup>6</sup>

He was without any comforts of God — no feeling that God loved him — no feeling that God pitied him — no feeling that God supported him. God was his sun before — now that sun became all darkness... He was without God — he was as if he had no God. All that God had been to him before was taken from him now. He was Godless — deprived of his God. He had the feeling of the condemned, when the Judge says: "Depart from me, ye cursed," "who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power." He felt that God said the same to him. Ah! This is the hell which Christ suffered. The ocean of Christ's sufferings is unfathomable... He was forsaken in the [place] of sinners. If you close with him as your surety, you will never be forsaken... "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" [The answer?] For me — for me.

– Robert M. M'Cheyne <sup>7</sup>

God has chosen to save the world through the cross, through the shameful and powerless death of the crucified Messiah. If that shocking event is the revelation of the deepest truth about the character of God, then our whole way of seeing the world is turned upside down... all values are transformed... God refuses to play games of power and prestige on human terms.

– Richard Hays <sup>8</sup>



**Application questions****1. What are some of the practical implications of the cross that each of the readings highlights?**

1. The reading from Green and Baker shows how the cross subverts normal worldly views of greatness and power.
  - a) In Mark 10, some of the disciples are arguing over who would be greatest and have the highest status. In v.45, Jesus teaches his disciples that he *"came not to be served, but to serve — and give his life a ransom for many."* He uses the cross to reveal a whole different way to understand "status."
    - b) Baker and Green point out that in the Roman Empire one grows in greatness by accruing power in two ways.
      - i. You serve (only) superiors from whom you earn favors and benefits including the right to be put over others.
      - ii. You demand that those you are over — your inferiors — serve you diligently and earn your favor and benefits.
      - iii. This was all based on the concept of gods who are served and only give favor and benefits to those who earn them.
    - c) But the cross shows us the God who comes and serves people infinitely below him and saves by grace, giving favor and benefits to those who have not earned them.
    - d) This upends the world-system and creates a whole different human society.
      - i. In this alternate society — one dominated by the concept of the cross — one grows in greatness by giving away power.
      - ii. Every believer responds to the freeing grace of the crucified Messiah by serving all others, but especially those below you in the world, with fewer privileges and options.
      - iii. Then, in turn, they are freed to serve all others, including those below them as well.

A schematic way to put this —

Roman World-View

God(s): “Inferiors serve me.”

Relate to gods: by giving them service

Results: Human relationships

1) of power over others

2) but insecurity toward the gods

Christian World-View

God (in Christ): “I serve my inferiors.”

Relate to God: by accepting his service of you

Results: Human relationships

1) of service to others

2) and assurance toward God

2. The reading from Wolf shows how the cross changes our relationship with those who have wronged us. The cross is an enormous resource for forgiveness and reconciliation.

a) Wolf names two major barriers to forgiveness:

i. We fear the perpetrator, feeling that if we grant him any humanity that somehow his evil will continue.

ii. We deny the depth of our own sinfulness, hiding how much our own hearts are like those of the perpetrator.

e) But the cross deals with both barriers. The cross (especially if we look at the “Battle” metaphor for the atonement) assures us that evil will not triumph, that in the end all will be put right. We do not, therefore, have to be the perpetrator’s executioner.

f) The cross also shows us that we are equally sinners yet also eternally loved. This frees us to admit our common sinfulness with the perpetrator.

g) It is difficult to imagine how one could live a life of forgiveness without a profound grasp of the cross.

3. The excerpt of the poem by Edward Shillito shows how the cross changes our attitude toward suffering. The cross does not give us a simple rational answer to the question of why God allows suffering in the world to continue.

a) However, the cross gives us something that no other philosophy or religion offers us — a God who cares so much for us that he is willing to become involved in our suffering.

- b) We may not know the exact reason that God has allowed suffering to continue, but we know he must have a very good one, since he was willing to take on our suffering himself. Whatever we say about God and suffering, we cannot accuse the God who was in Jesus Christ on the cross of indifference.
  - c) If we don't believe in the cross, then it is impossible to believe that the suffering of innocents can ever have any valid purpose at all.
  - d) Shillito's famous poem rightly points to the mysterious "healing balm" of knowing that the God of the cross (alone) has scars.
4. The reading from the Scottish preacher M'Cheyne reminds us deeply of God's love for us. The cross is at least as great a testimony of our value and worth to God as it is of our sinfulness.
- a) Why would God endure such infinite pain? For us. What greater personal affirmation is possible?
  - b) The cross is, therefore, psychologically transforming. It does not simplistically lead us to either high self-esteem or low self-esteem.
  - c) It is the greatest possible foundation for recognizing one's own value and worth, yet it comes with the humbling, sobering message of our sin.
  - d) It keeps us from either inferiority or superiority. It creates a unique, stable, balanced, solid self-image.

Richard Hays' quote is a general, but fitting summary. This quote comes from a commentary on 1 Corinthians 1-2, where Paul says that the cross upends the basic value system of *every* culture, whether Jewish, or Greek, or whatever. It creates a whole new human society, based on service rather than on accrual of power. It completely changes our attitude toward our enemies, our suffering, ourselves, and our God.

**2. Many people today ask, "But why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn't God just forgive us?" Formulate an answer that draws on Biblical material.**

When someone truly, seriously wrongs you, there is a sense that there is now some kind of debt that has to be dealt with. It is a barrier between you. You cannot simply continue to relate to the perpetrator in the same way unless the barrier is removed.

There are only two basic ways for this debt to be “paid down” and removed so a relationship can continue.

1. The perpetrator himself can pay it down.
  - a) If the person is extremely remorseful and seems to be suffering—that helps remove the sense of debt.
  - b) If the person does not have any remorse, but you find ways to do “pay back” — that also helps remove the sense of debt.
  - c) If the perpetrator experiences enough pain and suffering you may eventually feel the debt beginning to get paid down.
2. The other possible way to deal with the debt is for you to pay it. This is what forgiveness is — the very costly willingness to absorb the debt yourself.
  - a) Though you want to — you refrain from hurting the person.
  - b) Though you want to — you refrain from “running the person down” in your own mind and heart.
  - c) Though your reputation has been hurt, you don’t try to get it back at the expense of the others by vilifying him or her.
  - d) Forgiveness is refraining from making the other person pay down the debt. It is absorbing the cost yourself.
  - e) But after a while, if you are disciplined in your forgiveness, you will find your anger and resentment receding. The debt has been paid down by you.

This is not just true at the psychological level, but also at the sociological level.

- If a man robs or rapes, there is a debt to society. If he goes to jail, for many years, he pays the debt.
- But what if a judge would say, “Well, I can see you are sorry! You can go free!” What would happen? Society would pay the debt.
  - a) The people who were directly robbed or hurt are degraded and treated as worthless.
  - b) But almost certainly, a lack of deterrence will lead to the crime happening again to other people.

So a serious wrong always produces a debt.

- It cannot be dismissed or wished away. Someone has to pay it.
- Forgiveness is always painful and costly.
- And if this is true for us, how much more true would this be of God?

What is the cross? This is God absorbing the debt for our sin in himself. Why did Jesus have to die? The answer is — *every* sin results in a debt that must be paid for the relationship to be restored.

- If we are made to pay the debt of our sin against God we would be lost forever. So God paid it. Everyone who forgives has to pay the debt. (This does not mean that God conforms to the way we are, only that we are an image of the way God is.)
- If someone asks why God had to pay that way — on the cross, with blood — we can't know the answer to everything. It only makes sense that there would be some unfathomable mystery to the doctrine of the cross.

### Suggested further study

John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, (IVP, 1986)

1 John Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (IVP, 1986) pp.159-160

2 P. Lewis, R. Clements, G. Haslam, *Rescue: God's Promise to Save* (Christian Focus, 1995), pp.100-101.

3 The Trinity — that God is both three and one — is a difficult doctrine to grasp. But if we forget it, the atonement does not make sense. Obviously, the atonement shows us the humanity of Christ, since he was able to be killed. But if we forget the deity of Christ — if we forget that 'God was in Christ' — then the cross can look like a kind of 'child abuse' in which the harsh unwilling Father abandons his loving Son.

4 J. Green and M. Baker, *Recovering the Scandal of the Cross*, (IVP, 2001) pp.39-40.

5 Miroslav Wolf, *Exclusion and Embrace* (Abingdon, 1996), p.124

6 Edward Shillito, "Jesus of the Scars", quoted in William Temple, *Readings in St. John's Gospel* (Macmillan, 1940), pp.384-385.

7 R.M'Cheyne, *Sermons of R.M. M'Cheyne* (Banner of Truth, 1961), p. 47-48.

8 Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (Abingdon, 1997), p.27, 31, 36.



# Gospel Christianity

## How do we change?

### Study 6 | Course 1

Christians do not grow simply by trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. What then is the key to how we change into Christ-likeness?

#### KEY CONCEPT – IDOLATRY

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

Idolatry is a major theme in the Bible for what ails us — psychologically, intellectually, sociologically and culturally.

##### The inevitability of idolatry

- The very first commandment is *“I am your God — have no other gods before me.”* There is no third option between those two.
- Rom 1:25 says we will *“worship and serve”* either God or some created thing (an idol). It is not possible that we should worship nothing.
- Something will capture our hearts and imaginations and be the most important thing, the ultimate concern, value and allegiance.
- So every personality, community, and thought-form will be based on either God Himself or on some god-substitute, an idol.

##### The range of idolatry

- So an idol is anything more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity.
- Idolatry is the inordinate desire of (even) something good.
  - a) This means any *thing* can become an idol, including good things such as:
    - i. career
    - ii. family
    - iii. achievement
    - iv. your independence
    - v. a political cause
    - vi. material possessions
    - vii. certain people in dependence on you
    - viii. power and influence
    - ix. physical attractiveness
    - x. romance
    - xi. human approval
    - xii. financial security
    - xiii. your place in a particular social circle or institution

- Idols are not only personal and individual; they are also corporate and cultural.
- a) Different societies can make into ultimate values things like:
  - i. the family ("traditional values")
  - ii. feeling (romanticism)
  - iii. the state (communism)
  - iv. racial superiority (fascism)
  - v. rationality (empiricism)
  - vi. individual will and experience (existentialism)
  - vii. group identity (post-modernism)

**The power of idolatry**

- On the one hand, an idol is an empty "nothing" with no real power to help us and save us (Is 40:20; 41:6,7). It is only a way we try to save ourselves (Is 44:10-13).
- On the other hand, paradoxically, our idols exercise great power and control over us. They enslave (Jer 2:25).
  - a) Once we have come to believe that something will really make us happy, then we cannot help ourselves — we must follow our god.
  - b) Idols demand complete dependence (Is.44:17); they completely capture our hearts (Ezek 14:1-5).
- In Romans 1 Paul shows how all the breakdowns in life — spiritual, psychological, social, cultural — come because we "worship created things rather than the creator." (Rom 1:25)

**The importance of understanding idolatry**

- The Bible does not consider idolatry to be one sin among many (and thus now a rare sin only among primitive people).
- Rather, idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong.
- Why do we ever fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is "because we are weak and sinful."
- The specific answer is always that there is something besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy, that is more important to your heart than God, and that is enslaving the heart through inordinate desires.



- a) For example, we would not lie unless first we had made something — human approval, “face,” reputation, power over others, financial advantage — more important and valuable to our hearts than the grace of God.
- So the secret to change is to identify and dismantle the basic idols of the heart.

### 1. Which statements impressed you and why?

### 2. What are some examples of personal idols? What are some examples of social-cultural idols? Discuss how idols are at the root of so many problems.

#### Personal Idols

- *Workaholism* – Work becomes the thing you live for—to be productive and useful, or to feel successful and powerful.
- *Codependence* – Because you “need to feel needed” you stay in unhealthy relationships with perennially needy individuals.
- *Beauty and image* – This can have various forms including:
  - a) eating disorders and excessive time, effort, and concern about appearance
  - b) pornography
- *Romance* – This is not the same as pure sexual gratification. You live for crushes or for someone to love you.
- *Family* – This idolatry has many variations:
  - a) your children’s prospects and happiness become the most important thing
  - b) meeting your parents’ expectations become the most important thing
  - c) getting married or having a “perfect” marriage becomes the most important thing

- *Money* – This idolatry has many variations:
  - a) having (and saving) lots of money may be your security, the main way you feel safe in the world,
  - b) having (and spending) lots of money may be the main way of feeling significant and important
- *Perfectionism in general* - You live to keep complete control of your life.

**Social/Cultural Idols**

- *Fascism* makes an idol of one's race or nationality.
  - a) "I am acceptable because I am a \_\_\_\_\_" rather than getting identity as a child of God.
  - b) Leads of course to racism.
- *Communism* makes an idol of the state.
  - a) Government will solve all problems rather than God.
  - b) Marx said everything is political, and all problems are political/economic ones, rather than spiritual ones.
- *Populism* makes an idol out of public opinion or majority rule, rather than what God says is right.
- *Capitalism* makes an idol out of the free market.
  - a) Like communism, it sees all our problems as economic ones, all issues in cost-benefit terms and all things, even people, as commodities.
- *Multiculturalism* makes one's ethnic group or culture an absolute value.
  - a) There are no absolute standards by which to judge.
- *Enlightenment "humanism"* makes an idol of reason and scientific investigation.
  - a) Science has an answer for everything and reason will open all doors.
- *Individualism* makes an idol out of individual freedom.
  - a) Nothing must curb the individual's freedom to choose whatever he or she wants to be happy.
- *Traditionalism* makes the family and tradition an idol.
  - a) Traditional cultures see the rights of individuals as unimportant compared to the name and interests of the family and tribe.

**Summary**

At the root of all problems (personal or social), ideologies and all non-Christian philosophies is the elevation of some created thing to the place of ultimate worship and ultimate arbiter of truth and meaning.

"[When does the pursuit of a legitimate goal become idolatry, or 'ideology'?] An ideology arises the moment the end indiscriminately justifies every means... Thus a nation's goal of material prosperity becomes an idol [the ideology of materialism] when we use it to justify the destruction of the natural environment or allow the abuse of individuals or classes of people. A nation's goal of military security [becomes an idol [the ideology of militarism] when we use it to justify the removal of rights to free speech and judicial process, or the abuse of an ethnic minority.]

– Bob Goodzwaard – *Idols of Our Time*

## BIBLE STUDY

Romans 1:18-25

**1. Vv. 18-21 – What is the reason that our minds and hearts become “futile” and “darkened”? (Look especially at v.21a.)**

- In v.21 Paul tells us that the basic reason we make idols is because we want to control our lives, though deep down we know that we owe God everything.
  - a) We do not “glorify God.” That is, we do not act toward him as if he is as great, important, supreme and central as he actually is.
  - b) We do not “give thanks to him.” That is, we fail to act toward him as if we are as totally dependent and indebted to him as we actually are.
- A lack of appropriate gratitude reveals a heart that does not want to admit its own limitations. It wants to think of itself as far more self-sufficient than it really is.
- We “suppress” (v.18) these facts because we don’t want to admit our complete allegiance to him. We want to be our own masters.

**2. V. 22 – What is always the result of seeking to avoid the true God and being our own masters?**

- In v.25 Paul tells us that the rejection of God’s control of our lives leads inevitably to counterfeit “god-construction.”
  - a) We cannot simply deny the glory of God (v.21); we must “exchange the glory of God” for the glory of something else. We must glorify something.
  - b) We must worship, adore, and build our lives on something as an ultimate value.
  - c) Since we were created for worship, we cannot eliminate God without creating God-substitutes.
- Because God created the world, all created things have some of God’s glory in them, of course, so it is possible to find these things great, wonderful and admirable.
- The problem comes from giving any created thing inordinate affection—affection that is ultimate, like that which we owe God.

### 3. V. 24-25 – What are some of the results of idolatry in our lives?

The first result is deception.

- *“They exchanged the truth of God for a lie” (v.25). Compare this with v.21, where it says that as a result of rejecting God “their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened.”*
- Each life is distorted by a major “life lie.”
  - a) At the base of every one of our life choices, our emotional structure, and our personality is a false belief system centered on some idol, something besides God that we think can give us the life and joy that only God can give.
  - b) We look to something besides Jesus to be our “savior,” our “righteousness,” that which makes us good and acceptable.
  - c) Of course, no created thing can possibly have this kind of power; it can never satisfy. But we live in denial of this.
  - d) Thus every idol leads us to create a delusional field, spinning out a whole set of false definitions of success and failure and happiness and sadness and worth.
  - e) Our hearts operate off of deep false beliefs such as, “If I can just achieve \_\_\_\_\_, then my life will be valid” or “Since I have lost or failed \_\_\_\_\_, now I can never be happy or forgiven.”
- Paul shows how comprehensive this delusion, blindness and deception can be.
  - a) It consists of intellectual confusion and frustration — (v.21 – “futile reasoning”) — because to deny the supremacy of the true God requires holding to many intellectual non-sequiturs and the suppression of truth.
  - b) But it also consists of emotional confusion and frustration — (v.21 – “darkened hearts”) — because the heart and desires were originally built for God and nothing put on the throne of the heart will satisfy them.
  - c) Our hearts will constantly be a churning mix of anxiety, anger, despondency, and boredom (see quote by T. Oden below).
  - d) Yet we will never blame the idol itself. We will blame God, the world, our own failures, or the failure of others.

The second result is slavery.

- “God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts” (v.24). This tells us that our heart desires, growing inordinate and uncontrollable through idolatry, simply sweep us away. We are given over to them. They “have” us.
- In v.25, Paul says that we not only worship our idols but we serve or obey them.
  - a) Human beings are goal-oriented. To live in the world, we have to order our lives into priorities and something must have the highest priority, that which gives us meaning.
  - b) Whatever becomes the bottom line — that which defines and validates all other things — we will feel absolutely driven to do. We are given over to them. They control us. We have to have them in order to be happy, to like ourselves, to have meaning in life.
  - c) And since they do not satisfy because our hearts were made to center on God, not on any created thing, we always need more and more.

“Whatever controls us is our lord. The person who seeks power is controlled by power. The person who seeks acceptance is controlled by the people he or she wants to please. We do not control ourselves. We are controlled by the lord of our lives.”

– Rebecca Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker*

Since every human being must have an ultimate “good” by which all other choices are made and values are judged, we all “offer ourselves” to something (Rom.6:16).

- Therefore every human being is in “covenant service” to a “lord” which works its will out through our bodies. (Romans 6:16-19)
- Even after conversion, our old false saviors/lords and their attendant false belief systems still distort our lives unless the power of the Holy Spirit continually renews our minds and hearts. (Romans 7:14-25)
- The key to freedom is the application of the gospel of grace (Romans 6:14 – Sin will not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace).

## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

“All those who do not at all times... trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commands... For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere sham, show and pretense, with nothing back of them... If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]...”

– Martin Luther <sup>1</sup>

We all automatically gravitate toward the assumption that we are justified by our level of sanctification, and when this posture is adopted, it inevitably focuses our attention not on Christ but on the adequacy of our own obedience. We start each day with our personal security not resting on the accepting love of God and the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements in the Christian’s life. Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to a self-righteousness [some form of idolatry] which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace...

– Richard Lovelace <sup>2</sup>

“‘Lust,’ **epithumiai** [inordinate desires], used in Gal.5:16ff; Eph.2:3, 4:22; I Pet.2:11, 4:2; I John 2:16; James 1:14ff, is the catch-all for what is wrong with us. The NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires... for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed ‘idolatry’ (Eph.5:5 and Colossians 3:5).

– David Powlison <sup>3</sup>

When a finite value has been elevated to centrality and imagined as a final source of meaning, then one has chosen... a god... One has a “god” when a finite value is... viewed as that without which one cannot receive life joyfully.

**Anxiety** becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values... Suppose my god is sex or my physical health or the Democratic Party. If I experience any of these under genuine threat, then I feel myself shaken to the depths. **Guilt** becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values... Suppose I value my ability to teach and

communicate clearly... then if I [fail in teaching well] I am stricken with neurotic guilt. **Bitterness** becomes neurotically intensified when someone or something stands between me and something that is my ultimate value.] To the extent to which limited values are exalted to idolatries... [when any of those values are lost], **boredom** becomes pathological and compulsive... My subjectively experienced boredom may then become infinitely projected toward the whole cosmos... This picture of the self is called despair [The milder forms are disappointment, disillusionment, cynicism.]”

– T.C. Oden <sup>4</sup>

Your religion is what you do with your solitude.

– Archbishop William Temple

### Application questions

**1. How, according to Luther, does failing to believe in justification by grace alone break the first commandment? What is the implication for how we really change our hearts and lives?**

Luther saw that the Old Testament law against idols and the New Testament emphasis on justification by faith alone are essentially the same.

- He says that failure to believe that God accepts us fully in Christ — and to look to something else for our salvation — is a failure to keep the first commandment, namely, having no other gods before him.
- Why? Luther reasons that if you try to earn your own salvation through works-righteousness then you must be, by definition, looking to something else to be your Savior, even if that is your own moral record and performance.

Then Luther says that we cannot truly keep any of the other laws unless we keep the first law — against idolatry and self-justification and salvation.

- The Ten Commandments begin with two commands against idolatry, followed by the other eight.



- Why this order? It is because the fundamental problem in law-breaking is always idolatry.
  - a) In other words, we never break commandments 3-10 without first breaking 1-2.
  - b) We would not lie, commit adultery, kill, etc. unless we were first making some other thing, or things, more of an ultimate hope and value to us than God.
    - i. We would not steal if God was our real wealth.
    - ii. We would not commit adultery if God was our real beauty.
    - iii. We would not lie unless there was something we needed to have — honor or power or approval or control — more than God.
  - c) Though we may intellectually accept the gospel of salvation by Christ and grace, our hearts are functionally looking to something else as our hope and justification at the moment we sin.
- Thus beneath any particular sin is this sin of rejecting Christ-salvation and indulging in self-salvation.

The only way we can really fundamentally change then is not simply through moral reformation but through ever deeper self-understanding of and repentance for our idols, our self-justifications and ever deeper faith and joy in Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord.

## 2. What help do the Powlison and Oden quotes give us for identifying our own idols?

These quotes show us that one of the simplest ways to identify idols is to look at repeated, excessive, uncontrollable emotions.

Everyone (including Jesus!) became angry, concerned, and sad. But idols create inordinate emotions because our hearts promote idols to inordinate importance in our lives. So we can ask questions like the following:

- *If you are angry:* "Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am angry — because I am being blocked from having something I think is a necessity when it is not?"
- *If you are fearful or badly worried:* "Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so scared — because something is being threatened which I think is a necessity when it is not?"

- *If you are despondent or hating yourself:* “Is there something too important to me? Something I am telling myself I have to have? Is that why I am so down, because I have lost or failed at something which I think is a necessity when it is not?”

Another way to tell what your idols are is to ask questions such as:

- What is my greatest horror?
- What, if I lose it, would deprive me of a desire to even live?
- What do I need in order to accept myself?

“...that most basic question which God poses to each human heart: ‘Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart’s functional trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?’

Questions... bring some of people’s idol systems to the surface. To who or what do you look for life-sustaining stability, security and acceptance? What do you really want and expect [out of life]? What would [really] make you happy? What would make you an acceptable person? Where do you look for power and success? These questions or similar ones tease out whether we serve God or idols, whether we look for salvation from Christ or from false saviors. [This bears] on the immediate motivation of my behavior, thoughts, feelings. In the Bible’s conceptualization, the motivation question is the lordship question: Who or what “rules my behavior, the Lord or an idol?”

– David Powlison, *“Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair”*

### 3. What help does the quote by William Temple provide us for identifying the idols of the heart?

Temple’s quote leads us to imagine ourselves standing on a corner, waiting for someone for a long time. We have nothing to read, to listen to, to look at, or to do.

- Here is the question. When your mind is completely unfettered and able to dwell wherever it wishes — what do you think about naturally, instinctively? Where do your thoughts go habitually?
- Do they go to God — to his excellence, his attributes, his glory, his beauty? Is that where your mind and heart go automatically? Of course not.
- But wherever they go (Temple indicates) there you find your true religion — your real god, your ultimate concern, the thing your heart most rests in and worships.
- We *should* love God so much that he dominates our solitude. We should love God so much that we are content in any circumstances because we always have what we most want in life!

- Of course this is never true of us. Other things usurp God's place and what we do with our solitude is one of the great indicators of what those things are.

**4. Imagine a Christian person who says: "I have become very depressed since I lost my job. I feel like a failure."**

- **Friend A says: "Your whole problem is a lack of faith! Christians shouldn't be depressed! You should repent and be more thankful."**
- **Friend B says: "Your whole problem is that you don't see how much God loves you! You need to think about your value to him."**

**On the basis of what you have learned, determine what is inadequate about both approaches — and suggest a better approach.**

**Friend A: The "Moralizing" Approach**

A typical approach to personal problems among orthodox and conservative Christians can best be called the "moralizing" approach.

- Basically, this approach says to the troubled person: *"Your problem is that you are doing wrong. Repent!"*
- Of course, this may be part of the problem but this approach doesn't go deep enough. It focuses on behavior, but we must find out the why of our behavior.
  - a) Why do I find I want to do the wrong things?
  - b) What inordinate desires are drawing me to do so?
  - c) What are the idols and false beliefs behind them?
- To simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself) to "repent and change behavior" is insufficient, because the lack of self-control is coming from a belief that says even if you live up to moral standards, but you don't have this, then you are still a failure.
- You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all — your particular idolatry.

**Friend B: The "Self-Esteem" Approach**

A typical approach to personal problems in society today (and in the church) can best be called the "self-esteem" approach.

- Basically this approach says to the troubled person: *"Your problem is that you don't see how good and valuable you are. Rejoice!"*

- Of course, this may be part of the problem but this approach also fails to go deep enough. It focuses on feelings but we must find out the why of our feelings.
  - a) Why do I have such strong feelings of despair (or fear, or anger) when this or that happens?
  - b) What are the inordinate desires that are being frustrated?
  - c) What are the idols and false beliefs behind them?
- To simply tell an unhappy person (or yourself) "God loves you — rejoice!" is insufficient, because the unhappiness is coming from a belief that says even if God loves you, but you don't have this, then you are still a failure.
- You must replace this belief through repentance for the one sin under it all — your particular idolatry.

#### **The "Gospel" Approach**

Basic Analysis: *"Your problem is that you are looking to something besides Christ for your happiness. Repent and rejoice!"*

- This confronts a person with the real sin under the sins and behind the bad feelings. Our problem is that we have given ourselves over to idols.
  - a) Every idol-system is a way of our-works-salvation, and thus it keeps us "under the law."
  - b) Paul tells us that the bondage of sin is broken when we come out from under the law — when we begin to believe the gospel of Christ's-work-salvation.
  - c) Only when we realize in a new way that we are righteous in Christ is the idol's power over us broken.
  - d) *"Sin shall not be your master for you are not under law, but under grace"* (Rom.6:14). You will only be "under grace" and free from the controlling effects of idols to the degree that you have both repented for your idols, and rested and rejoiced in the saving work and love of Christ instead.

**Suggested further study**

David Powlison, "*Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*"

1 Martin Luther, *Treatise Concerning Good Works* (1520) (Part X. XI)

2 *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*

3 David Powlison, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*

4 *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia* Chap. 6



# Gospel Christianity

## What is Jesus' mission?

### Study 7 | Course 1

Many think of salvation mainly in terms of individual forgiveness and change. But God's plans for the world extend beyond this — to the coming of the *"kingdom."*

#### KEY CONCEPT – KINGDOM

Read & mark: "?" – Question raised; "!" – Insight helpful

##### **The prediction of the kingdom**

- The world was created as a place of complete flourishing and harmony under the rule of God.
- Sin, resistance to God's authority, led to the unraveling of creation.
  - a) Relationships with God, other races and classes, individuals and physical nature itself disintegrate where God is not acknowledged as King.
- But God reveals that redemption will ultimately entail the complete healing of creation, including social justice, the reunification of all humanity and the end of physical decay and death (Is 11:1-10).

##### **The definition of the kingdom**

- The kingdom of God, then, is the renewal of all creation by the re-entry of God's ruling power through Christ's death and resurrection.
- Hearts, relationships, communities, and practices are healed and re-woven with one another to the degree that they come under the authority of Jesus, through his Word and Spirit (Ps 72; Col 1:16-20 and Eph 1:9-10).

##### **Entering the kingdom**

- The kingdom is entered by repentance and faith (Mark 1:15), forgiveness (Col 1:13-14) and the new birth (John 3:3, 5).
- The kingdom begins to renovate our heart-character into goodness, peace and joy (Rom 14:17).

##### **"Thinking" the kingdom**

- Things in the world are only properly understood when viewed through an understanding of the kingdom.

- We only understand a thing if we realize:
  - a) it was created originally good in itself
  - b) it is fallen and marred by sin
  - c) it can eventually be redeemed under Christ the healing king

#### **Living the kingdom means:**

##### *Grace and Freedom*

The alternative to Christ's kingdom in my personal life is slavery to personal idols.

- Anything more important than Christ for happiness (e.g. successful career or happy family) becomes a master because it is a savior.
- When Jesus is Savior and Lord, his kingdom liberates from the power of false masters (e.g. from drivenness over work, excessive anxiety over children.)

##### *Peace and Justice*

The alternative to Christ's kingdom in social relationships is slavery to social idols.

- The world-system attaches high value to power, comfort, success and recognition.
- But God's kingdom is won not through strength and accomplishment but through the cross.
  - a) It is entered not by the strong but by those who admit their weakness and need for grace.
- This completely changes our attitude toward the poor, the powerless and the marginal.
  - a) Working toward the peace and social justice God will eventually bring is a sign of the kingdom.

#### **Work and Witness**

The alternative to Christ's kingdom in your vocation and work is to be controlled by cultural idols — ideologies.

- Every field of human endeavor puts forth something other than God — financial profit, individual rights or happiness, human reason, group power — as the ultimate value and goal.



- Thus when we do our work with kingdom values, it will be distinctive from the work carried on under the power of ideologies.

### **The stages of the kingdom**

- The Bible tells us the kingdom has arrived (Lk 17:20-21; Mt 12:28) but not fully (Mt 6:10; 25:34).
  - a) Like a seed it is nearly hidden, but will grow into fullness (Mt 13:31-42).
  - b) It is already, but not yet, here.
- We must keep this in mind to avoid either over-optimism or over-pessimism in our ministry.

### **1. Which statements impressed you and why?**

Be sure to spend some time reflecting on the concept that God's ruling power heals the broken and re-weaves the unraveled fabric of creation.

- This fabric has been eaten away by sin in every aspect.
  - a) Because of sin, our bodies, our relationships, our societies and our psyches are always breaking down and pulling apart rather than cohering in harmony and unity.
- But Psalm 72 describes how the true king's power is:
  - a) healing (vv.1-7 – he is like the sun and the rain on the grass)
  - b) re-uniting (vv.8-14 – he will bring the races/nations together and the classes together)
  - c) endless (vv.15-19)

Isaac Watts' famous hymn "Jesus Shall Reign," based on Psalm 72, sums up our theme beautifully:

Blessings abound where'er he reigns;  
The pris'ner leaps to loose his chains;  
The weary find eternal rest,  
And all the sons of want are blest.

Where he displays his healing power,  
Death and the curse are known no more;  
In him the tribes of Adam boast  
More blessings than their father lost.

In another famous hymn, "Joy to the World," Watts lays out the same teaching. Psalm 96 tells us what will happen when Jesus returns to "judge," or rule, the earth. All of nature explodes with joy. *"Let the heavens be glad, let the earth rejoice; let the sea roar and all that fills it; let the field exult, and all that is within it. Then shall the trees of the wood sing for joy before the Lord, for he comes, he comes to judge the earth. He will judge the world in righteousness and the people with his truth."* (Vv.11-13)

Watts paraphrases Psalm 96 in stanza two of the famous Christmas hymn.

Joy to the world! The Savior reigns:  
Let men their songs employ,  
While fields and floods, rocks, hills, and plains,  
Repeat the sounding joy.

Then, in striking language, he announces that the kingdom of Christ means the complete reversal of all the curse of sin pronounced by the Lord in Genesis 3.

No more let sins and sorrows grow,  
Nor thorns infest the ground;  
He comes to make his blessings flow  
Far as the curse is found!

The kingdom of God is the means for the renewal of the entire world and all the dimensions of life. From the throne of Jesus Christ flows new life and power such that no disease, decay, poverty, blemish or pain can stand before it.

**2. What difference should it make to the way a local church ministers, that God's salvation will eventually not just save our souls but restore all of creation?**

This teaching leads the people of God to be a full service community.

As we have seen, the church must do evangelism in order to bring people into the kingdom.

- Colossians 1:13-14 tells us we are brought into the kingdom when we are forgiven, when we are converted (cf. John 3:5).
- So kingdom ministry entails first of all a ministry of proclaiming the gospel, bringing people to find Christ through repentance and faith.

But if the purpose of the kingdom of God is to heal all the results of sin — spiritual, psychological, social and physical — then Christians must also intentionally use their gifts and resources to fight disintegration in every area.

- This means that to fight disease and hunger, to provide help for the sick and physically afflicted is a sign of the kingdom to come.
  - a) This means that working to lift the poor out of poverty is a sign of the kingdom.
  - b) This means that when we bring people together within the church — people of different races and classes that cannot get along outside of the church — it is a sign of the kingdom.
- It also means that when we do our “secular” jobs with excellence, with integrity, love and with an eye to help others around us, it is also a sign of the kingdom.

Jesus' miracles were called “signs” of the kingdom. When John the Baptist asked if he really was the “Christ,” the king, he pointed to the signs of his ministry. *“The blind see, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news preached to them.”* (Matt 11:4-5.) Jesus healed, cleansed, and fed people miraculously.

- Often it is said that a miracle is a violation of the natural order. That may be true in a sense, but it would be more true to say that Jesus' miracles were *restorations* of the natural order.
  - a) God did not originally design us to be sick, diseased, hungry, poor and excluded (lepers).
  - b) So Jesus used his miraculous power to give people a foretaste of the salvation that was coming, the restoration of all creation by the ruling power of God.
- We may not have miraculous power, but our deeds must also be foretastes of the restoration of all creation. (See the quote by Edmund Clowney, below.)

## BIBLE STUDY

Mark 1:14-2:17

**1. What can you deduce about the kingdom of God from vv.14-15?**

1. We learn that the kingdom of God is central to what the gospel is all about.
  - a) The nearness of the kingdom is the good news (or gospel) according to Jesus' proclamation.
  - b) Since there can be no kingdom without a king, Jesus is saying, "The good news is that the true King is returning! I am he!"
2. We learn that the way to relate to this king and kingdom is not through making oneself worthy or accomplishing great deeds but by admitting your sin and weakness by and believing in the message ("Repent and believe the gospel." – v.15b).
  - a) This would have sounded extremely odd to Jesus' listeners! They expected a political Messiah, a liberator who would take power and put down opposition and lead the nation to a recovery of its prosperity and sovereignty.
  - b) This kind of "salvation" would have been "by the strong and for the strong." To be part of this kingdom program would have required only boldness, confidence and might.
  - c) Instead, Jesus speaks of a kingdom that requires an admission of weakness, guilt and sin. How completely strange!
3. We learn that Jesus must do something in history in order to set up his kingdom.
  - a) Why is the kingdom only "near" if Jesus is the king? Why didn't Jesus say, "The kingdom of God is here because I am here!"
  - b) The implication is that something has to happen through Jesus for the kingdom of God to arrive in the world. Something has to be done if his kingdom power and rule is going to be established and do its great liberating work.
  - c) Of course, this something is the death and resurrection of Christ. The actual presence of King Jesus was not enough. The king had to die for his subjects in order to save them.

## 2. What can you deduce about the kingdom from the incidents of 1:16-2:17?

Mark, Luke, and Matthew all begin their accounts with Jesus proclaiming his message in a nutshell; the kingdom of God is near. Then we are shown a series of incidents: the calling of the disciples; the healing of a leper and a paralytic; and other various healings and exorcisms. Most commentators understand the gospel-writers to be depicting for us the meaning of the kingdom. What do the incidents show us about it?

1. The calling of the disciples shows us that Jesus' kingly authority restructures every area of our lives.
  - a) In 1:16-17, when Jesus calls, two men leave their vocations (as fishermen). In 1:19-20, when Jesus calls, two men leave their father and friends (a shocking incident in such a family-oriented, patriarchal society!)
  - b) The Bible is not teaching here that all Christians must leave their jobs or their families and go into "full-time Christian work." (It is very possible that the disciples continued to fish, just as Paul continued his own trade after beginning ministry.)
  - c) Rather, here we learn that Jesus is a King whose authority alters the priorities in every area of our lives. He must come first in our work lives, our family lives — in every area.
  - d) Notice that Jesus says to the disciples (in essence): "I have a fishing beyond your fishing; I have a family beyond your family." What this means is not that we stop working or stop relating to our family, but that Jesus is now our ultimate value, hope, significance, or security.
  - e) We look to him for the things we would ordinarily look to our careers and families for.

### What does this mean?

- a) It means we are not as frightened, controlled, or driven in these areas.
  - i. All our emotional eggs are not in these baskets. When things go wrong we are not as paralyzed with fear or anger or despair.
- b) It means we must put Christ first in every area of life.
  - i. The salvation of Jesus itself brings new values, based on the cross and the pattern of gospel-salvation.

ii. Jesus' way is based not on taking power but on serving people.

iii. We are free to do this because of our acceptance and relationship to the Father through the Son.

iv. This radically changes the way we use money, relate to parents, run our businesses — in short, everything!

2. The casting out of demons shows us that Jesus' kingly authority brings internal, spiritual freedom.

a) In 1:23-26 we see Jesus exorcizing a demon-possessed man.

b) In Jesus' ministry of exorcism we see a paradigm for how the kingdom works. Here we begin to see how Jesus' kingdom is more than simply my individual obedience to his will.

i. Jesus comes into my life not simply as a rule-giver, but also as a liberator and a healer. He doesn't simply bring rules, but a new realm of his kingly, healing power.

c) The text implies that the alternative to having Jesus as a master is to have some other false and enslaving power as a master.

i. Most people are not personally possessed by a demon like this man (v.23-24) who has lost complete psychological control of himself.

ii. But Paul speaks in Eph 6 and elsewhere that, in another sense, we are fighting demonic "principalities" all the time.

iii. Anything we make into an ultimate value (like our career) becomes a master and begins to exercise enslaving power over us.

d) As I submit to Jesus' Lordship, I become free from the control of any other lords or gods. (See above, "Key Concept.")

3. The healing of the leper shows us that Jesus' kingly rule brings social justice, inclusion and change.

a) Because of the fear of contagion, in all ancient cultures lepers were forbidden to be part of society. They were considered pariahs, "untouchables," and were reduced to the most destitute poverty, emotional isolation and loneliness, and social marginalization.

b) All three gospel writers note how Jesus "reached out his hand and touched the man" (1:41).

- i. Jesus didn't need to touch him in order to heal him, so the touch must instead be Jesus' effort to heal him emotionally and socially as well.
  - ii. He commands the man to show himself to the priest and get re-instated into the community (1:44).
- c) Throughout the gospels, we see Jesus reaching out to lepers, tax collectors, Gentiles, "fallen" women, and the poor — all people who the world excluded from the centers of power, respectability and influence.
- d) But Jesus brings such people into the center of his new community that he forms — the church. He is especially warm toward people the world considers losers, the unimportant, the outcasts.
  - i. Why? The salvation of Jesus was achieved not by taking power but through weakness and service (the incarnation and the cross).
  - ii. And the salvation of Jesus is received not by those who are accomplished and spiritually strong but by those who admit that they are weak and spiritually bankrupt.
- e) So the pattern of Jesus' salvation — the cross, the "Great Reversal" — leads us to look at power, recognition, status, wealth and accomplishment in a completely different way from the way the world looks at them.
- f) Racial and class superiority, accrual of money and power at the expense of others, yearning for popularity and recognition — all these are marks of living in the world, and the opposite of the mindset of the kingdom (Luke 6:20-26).
- g) The gospel creates a people with an alternate way of being human, a new, alternate "city" (Matt. 5:14-16).

Jesus' miracles of healing bodies and of feeding the multitudes show that King Jesus is concerned not only with taking control and therefore healing the spiritual world but also the physical.

- a) The concept of the kingdom of God moves us away from over-spiritualizing salvation.
  - i. When Jesus' kingdom is fully present in the world there will be no more sickness, death, poverty, crime, war or injustice.
  - ii. When God returns to rule, there will again be complete health, peace and justice in the world (Psalm 96, 98), just as there was none in the beginning (Genesis 1-2).

b) This means that to work against social injustice, disease, hunger and poverty is to be a sign pointing to God's kingdom. It is where his salvation and all history are going!

4. The healing of the paralytic shows us that Jesus' kingly rule brings, first and foremost, a new relationship with God.

a) The last healing miracle in this section shows us a group of friends bringing a paralyzed man to Jesus.

b) They obviously expect a physical healing, but first Jesus says to the man, "Son, your sins are forgiven" (2:5).

i. This is Jesus saying, in effect, "Your physical paralysis is not, ultimately, your main problem. If you don't get your sins pardoned and your alienation from God removed, then a physical healing will ultimately be fruitless."

c) In light of the radical social justice message of the healing of the leper, this is striking.

i. Jesus is saying that, though physical and social healing is important, nothing is more important than getting right with God.

ii. As he said in 1:15, the kingdom of God is not entered by simply doing good deeds for others. No — it is only entered through conversion. You must "repent and believe the good news" (1:15).

iii. Jesus says that we must be born again to see the kingdom (John 3:3) and to enter the kingdom (John 3:5).

So lastly, we see here that the kingdom of God means decisive personal submission to the Lordship of Christ.

- Notice the language throughout the Mark 1 passage — "at once they left..." (v.18); "without delay he called them, and they left..." (v.20).
- Jesus bursts into people's lives, ruptures the status quo and calls for change and decisive action. He breaks in and makes people choose.
- All of this shows that entering the kingdom of God takes a decisive act of radical, exclusive commitment to Jesus as the Savior and King.



**Summary**

- The healing, all-renewing presence of the kingdom of God has come back into the world and history because Christ is that true King.
- However, this King comes in a way that reverses the values of the world — in weakness and service, not strength and force—to die as a ransom for us.
- Therefore we enter this kingdom through the same upside-down pattern of the King who went to the cross. We are accepted not because of our ability or merit, but through repentance and sheer grace.
- Then, we live out this kingdom by following the upside-down pattern of the King who went to the cross. We live lives of sacrifice and service.

**READINGS**

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

[In the Gospel of Mark], God’s... invasion of the world has wrought an inversion: God has reversed the positions of insiders and outsiders. Those who are in positions of authority and privilege reject Jesus and the message. However, people of low or despised position in the social world of first-century Jewish culture receive the gospel gladly, for their need is great. The lepers, the demon-possessed, Gentile women (7:24-30), the Gentile centurion at the cross (15:39) [show] faithful response to Jesus. “Many who are the first will be the last, and the last will be first.” (10:31) Those familiar with the story should not under-estimate the shock of this inversion.

– Richard Hays <sup>1</sup>

The renewal of Christ’s salvation ultimately includes a renewed universe... Christ’s miracles were miracles of the kingdom, performed as signs of what the kingdom means... His blessing was pronounced upon the poor, the afflicted, the burdened and heavy-laden who came to Him and believed in Him... The miraculous signs that attested Jesus’ deity and authenticated the witness of those who transmitted the gospel to the church is not continued, for their purpose was fulfilled. But the pattern of the kingdom that was revealed through those signs must continue in the church... Kingdom evangelism is therefore holistic as it transmits by word and deed Christ’s promise for body and soul as well as Christ’s demand for body and soul.

– Ed Clowney <sup>2</sup>

The coming of the kingdom of God represents a final state of cosmic redemption, in which God and God's creatures dwell together in harmony and righteousness. It [represents] *shalom* — universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight... On the one hand, we need to avoid triumphalism, the prideful view that we Christians will fully succeed in transforming all or much of culture... On the other hand, we need to avoid the despairing tendency to write the world off and to remove ourselves to an island of like-minded Christians. The world, after all, belongs to God and is in the process of being redeemed by God. God's plan is to gather up *all things* in Christ (Eph 1:9-10). Christians have been invited to live beyond triumphalism and despair, spending ourselves for a cause we firmly believe will win in the end. In a vision lovely enough to break a person's heart, John shows us [in Revelation 21] that heaven comes to us and renews *this* world.

– Cornelius Plantinga <sup>3</sup>

The great danger is always to single out some aspect of God's good creation and identify it, rather than [sin], as the villain in the drama of human life... In the course of history this "something" has been variously identified as... the body and its passions (Plato and much Greek philosophy), human culture in distinction from nature (Rousseau and Romanticism), authority figures in society and family (Freud and depth psychology), economic forces [Marx and communism] or any number of things... As far as I can tell, the Bible is unique in its rejection of all attempts to either demonize some part of creation as the root of our problems or to idolize some part of creation as the solution.

– Al Wolters <sup>4</sup>

### Application questions

- 1. The Hays and Clowney quotes discuss how the Kingdom means peace and justice. Brainstorm some more ways that you can work for peace and justice in society, and work with Christian distinctiveness in your vocation.**

#### Working for peace and justice

- Work for safe housing, better schools and accessible health care in a poor neighborhood.
- Be extremely generous with your money and live at a significantly lower lifestyle than you would otherwise.

- Work for greater racial diversity and understanding within your own church and neighborhood.
- Work for political causes you believe promote the common good rather than the interests of one group over others. (There will be a future lesson on this subject alone.)

### Working with Christian distinctiveness

There is an extremely large variety of examples. Here is only one.

What is the ultimate value in a business, it's "bottom line?" In the dominant ideology today the ultimate, non-negotiable, controlling value is profit and therefore efficiency. Ultimately, everything the company does, it does to maximize profits.

- It may contribute to local community charities, it may promote ethical behavior among its workers, and it may try to be sensitive to worker concerns and morale but it does all these things as a means to the end of making more money. All these things are only done in order to promote long-term profits.
- This means that, whenever there is a *real* choice to be made between profit and community/neighborhood interests, ethical principles or worker needs, it is profit that always wins.

What would happen to a company that was operated on the principle of being a 'sign of the kingdom'?

- One of the signs of the kingdom is helping the company's broader community and neighborhood flourish.
- Another is promoting kingdom character such as integrity and love.
- Another is promoting the whole welfare of its workers so they flourish not only professionally but personally.

What if these things were ends and not means making a profit was the means not the end? In other words, we must make a profit in order to promote the welfare of our community and our workers — creating jobs, producing products for customers that really help them and make their world more civilized, helping people grow.

- On the surface, there might not be any extremely noticeable difference between a company run according to kingdom values and some other very well run company.
- But inside the company the differences would be quite noticeable.

- a) Good stewardship means efficiency, but there would be
  - i. a noticeable lack of adversarial relationships
  - ii. a lack of any sense of being exploited
  - iii. an extremely strong emphasis on product quality
  - iv. an ethical environment that goes "all the way down," even when high ethics mean a loss of money

To be a Christian in business means thinking out the implications of the gospel and God's kingship for your whole work-life.

- Without a concept of the kingdom, many people have thought that being a Christian at work meant simply personal witnessing and holding a Bible study at the office.
- These are both great ideas, of course! But it is a too individualistic understanding of a Christian's mission in the world.
- The Christian church is to be an embodiment of the kingdom, a counter-culture, a "pilot plant" of the kingdom, a royal colony of heaven here to display how human society can be under the Kingship of Christ (1 Pet 2:9-10).
- The church is to be a new society in which the world can see exhibited what family life, business practices, race relations, and all of life can be under the kingship of Jesus Christ.
- We are also to go out into the world as witnesses to the kingdom (Acts 1:6-8).
  - a) To spread the kingdom of God is more than simply winning men to Christ.
  - b) It is also working for healing of persons, families, relationships.
  - c) It is doing deeds of mercy and seeking justice (1 John 3:17-18).
  - d) It is ordering men's lives and relationships and institutions according to God's authority to bring in the blessedness of the kingdom.

**2. The Plantniga quote talks about the balance we must strike. What are the practical implications of the fact that the kingdom of God is already, but not yet, here?**

The kingdom of God is entered now through repentance and faith, the new birth.

- It is present wherever the Holy Spirit is present in power.
- Where God exerts his rule through his Word and Spirit, the effects of sin are healed.
- Thus the kingdom is like a great banquet (Matthew 22:2) and is a state of total fulfillment or "blessedness" (Matthew 5:3, 10).

But, as Francis Schaeffer has shown us, because the kingdom is only present *partially* but not fully, we must expect substantial healing, but not total healing in all areas of life.<sup>5</sup> This means that there are two ways that we can become unbalanced.

1. We can over-stress the "already" of the kingdom to the exclusion of the "not yet."
  - a) We can expect rather quick solutions to problems.
  - b) We can fail to expect any suffering or tragedy to come.
  - c) We can under-estimate the power of remaining sin in our hearts.
2. We can over-stress the "not yet" of the kingdom to the exclusion of the "already."
  - a) We can be too pessimistic about personal change.
  - b) We can withdraw from engaging the world, too afraid of being polluted by it.

John Stott (in his book *The Contemporary Christian*, IVP, 1992) suggests more applications:

**Knowledge of truth**

- God has spoken. In a time in which many insist that no one can know any truth for certain, our king has given us his Word.
- But, on the other hand, we must be humble about our ability to understand the Word perfectly. In those areas where Christians cannot agree, we should be less triumphalistic.

- The “not yet” means more charity in non-essentials, more humility and dialogue and tolerance and openness in areas of disagreement.

**Personal change and growth**

- The Holy Spirit has come into us already, subduing our fallen nature, our selfishness. The presence of the kingdom includes that we are made “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:3). An incredible truth! The “already” means more confidence that anyone can be changed, that any enslaving habit can be overcome.
- But, on the other hand, our fallen nature remains in us and will never be eliminated until the fullness of the kingdom. We must avoid pat answers, and we must not expect “quick fixes.”
- The “not yet” means more patience and understanding with growing persons, means to not be condescending nor impatient with lapses and failures.

**Church change and growth**

- The church is the community now of kingdom power.
- The “already” means confidence that God can bring revival and transformation to your whole community through the local church.
- But the “not yet” means error and evil will never be completely eradicated from the church. We must not then be harshly critical of imperfect congregations, nor jump impatiently from church to church over perceived blemishes.

**Social change**

- Christ is even now ruling over history (Eph.1:22ff).
- Through “common grace,” he gives the world the institutions of family and government, restraining evil, and he gives strong consciences and gifts of art and leadership and science to many to enrich the world.
- Alongside of trouble and pain, God has given improved health care and medical advance, growing defense of human rights, the abolition of slavery, many protections for working people, and so on.
- The “already” means that Christians can expect to use God’s power to change social conditions and communities.
- But, on the other hand, the kingdom is not yet here in its fullness. There will be “wars and rumors of wars.” Selfishness, cruelty, terrorism, oppression will continue.

- Christians harbor no illusions about politics nor expect utopian conditions. The “not yet” means that Christians will not trust any political or social agenda to bring about righteousness here on earth.

In general, those who believe that the kingdom is *only* “not yet” will be extremely pessimistic and negative about change in people, the church and society. Those who believe that the kingdom is *already* here will be overly optimistic and naive about the possibility of revival, change and transformation.

**3. Discuss Al Wolters quote. Give other examples of how a misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom has led to erroneous beliefs and philosophies.**

The Biblical teaching on the kingdom is that:

- a) the world was created *good*,
- b) everything is fallen and tainted because we lost the ruling power of God through sin,
- c) and everything will be restored by the final return of the king.

Every worldview has to answer the question: “What is wrong with life and how can it be fixed?” Every worldview singles out some part of the *good* creation as being the main source of the problem (thus demonizing something) and singles out some other part of the *fallen* creation as being the main solution.

- Thus Marxism assumes all our problems come from the powerful, greedy capitalists who won’t share the means of economic production with the people. The solution is a totalitarian state.
- Freud on the other hand believed all our problems come from repression of deepest desires for pleasure. The solution is the unrepressed freedom of the individual to pursue what will make him or her happy.
- Those who hold a “traditional values” worldview (which is the very opposite of Freud) think the problem with the world lies in bad, undisciplined, selfish people who won’t submit to traditional moral values and family responsibilities. The solution is a moral revival in society of religion, morality and virtue.

Only the Christian worldview locates the problem with the world *not* in any one part of the world *or* in any one group of people but in sin itself. And it locates the solution in God’s grace and the coming of the kingdom.

- Sin infects us all and so, while some of us are more on God's side than others, we cannot simply divide the world into the good guys and the bad. Though many churches are doing a great job, we are all basically part of the problem!
- On the other hand, there is every reason for hope. The kingdom of God is like a seed that *will* grow into the greatest of trees (Matthew 13); it is like a stone that grows into a mountain of righteousness that fills all the earth (Daniel 2). So to work *for* the saving of souls, the healing of bodies and the restoration of justice is a work that must win. It will win.

Without an understanding of the nature of the kingdom, we will be either naively utopian or cynical and disillusioned. We will be demonizing something that isn't all that bad and we will be idolizing something that isn't all that good.

**For further study**

Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Eerdmans, 2002.)

1 R.Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

2 E.P. Clowney "Kingdom Evangelism" in *The Pastor-Evangelist*, R. Greenway, ed. (Presbyterian and Reformed)

3 Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World* (Eerdmans, 2002.) p. 103-104, 137-138.

4 Al Wolters, *Creation Regained* (IVP, 1985) p. 50.

5 See Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Tyndale, 1971), p.134.



# Gospel Christianity

## Why can't I do this alone?

### Study 8 | Course 1

The gospel liberates individuals but it does so both through and for deep community.

#### KEY CONCEPT – COMMUNITY

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

##### God and community

The Triune Christian God is the only God who *is* a community.

- If God was eternally uni-personal, then love would be something that even God only knew secondarily, after he began to create other beings.
- But since God is tri-personal, love and friendship are *intrinsic* to ultimate reality.
- Therefore deep personal relationships are a good thing in themselves. They are what the universe is all about.

##### Salvation and community

Jesus said: *“This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”* (John 17:3).

- To know someone is to have a personal relationship with him or her. Jesus is saying that the thing you most need in the world is a personal relationship with God.
- This is not only the heart of New Testament religion, but of Old Testament religion. *“You will be my people, and I will be your God”* (Exodus 6:7).
- This statement tells us that salvation:
  - a) brings you into intimacy with God (signified by the pronouns *my* and *your*)
  - b) brings you into a community with others (you become part of a people)

##### Mission and community

Jesus prayed for his followers saying: *“Father, may all of them be one, just as you are in me and I am in you... that the world may believe you have sent me”* (John 17:21). Our loving unity is therefore the best declaration of the gospel to the world.

- In Matt 5:14-16, Jesus tells his followers they are a “city set on a hill” whose visible behavior shines out and shows the world the glory of God.
- What does it mean for Christians to be a “city” that the world can see (*‘on a hill’*)? It means that we are to be an alternate city in every city. The implications:
  - a) We are to reach out and bring into our Christian communities all the kinds of people in the city.
  - b) We are to model alternate ways to do everything — commerce, learning, art, sexuality, race relations, material sharing — everything.
  - c) Sex, money, and power are to be used in life-giving and non-destructive or addictive ways.
- Jesus’ command here is a corporate command. You can’t obey it alone. You cannot be an alternate city by yourself!

#### **Character and community**

Character is mainly shaped by the people with whom we eat, play, converse, counsel and study. It is therefore our primary social community that makes us what we are at the deepest level.

- All the “one another” passages of the Bible apply to this aspect of Christian community. We are to:
  - a) honor one another (Rom 12:10)
  - b) accept one another (Rom 15:7)
  - c) bear with one another (Col 3:12-13)
  - d) forgive one another (Eph 4:2,32)
  - e) pray for and confess sins to one another (James 5:16)
  - f) cheer and challenge one another (Heb.3:13)
  - g) admonish and confront one another (Rom 15:14; Gal 6:1-6)
  - h) warn one another (1 Thess 5:14)
  - i) instruct one another (Col. 3:16)
- We are to stop gossiping and slandering (Gal 5:15) or being fake (Rom 12:9) with each other.

- We are to bear burdens (Gal 6:2), share possessions (Acts 4:32ff) and submit to the needs (Eph 5:21) of each other.

**Summary**

The purpose of Jesus' salvation is not just to save individuals but to form a new, alternate society that is a sign that Jesus is Lord of the world and is going to redeem all of creation. We will not know God, win the world, nor change deeply apart from community.

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?****2. Think of some specific ways in which the church can be a counter-culture that shows the world how the gospel changes the way we use sex, money and power.**

Western believers usually think that we show the world Christ-likeness through our individual lives as believers. But it is just as important to exhibit Christ-likeness through our *corporate* life together. Here are just a couple of examples.

**Dating**

When we think of sexual ethics we usually think very individualistically. What does it mean to follow the Biblical sex ethic as a single Christian? It means:

- a) you shouldn't have sex until you are married
- b) you shouldn't marry someone who does not share a similar commitment to Christ.

But does that exhaust what it means to be a “light to the world” in the area of sex and relationships?

- Jesus told us to “let our light shine forth” to the world as a city — as a counter-culture.
- How should Christians as a community show the difference Christ makes in the area of sexuality? Here is one idea.
  - a) What if we were a community in which the single men didn’t only date good-looking women but actually assessed a potential partner’s worth primarily on the basis of her character?
  - b) And what if we were a community in which single women didn’t only date prosperous men but actually assessed a potential partner’s worth primarily on the basis of his character? (cf. 1 Sam 16:7; 1 Pet 3:3-4)<sup>1</sup>
- In our culture, looks, appearance and money are all-important in mate-selection. Yet it may be that most churches, even the more conservative ones, are basically “conformed to the world” in this area.
- So it is quite possible to be following the letter of the law in your individual ethics and still miss the importance of showing forth God’s glory in our community’s ways and practices.
- This is one way that we could be an alternate society — in the way sex and dating is carried out within our midst.

#### **Career advancement**

Jacques Ellul’s book *The Technological Society* is a Christian analysis of the centrality of “technique” today. Our modern society is very secular (oriented to the concrete “now” rather than to spiritual or eternal values) and therefore it is rationalistic and mechanistic.

- Ellul says that this modern sensibility shapes everything including our relationships.
  - a) Relationships often become, not a good or an end in themselves, but rather a means to further your own interests.
  - b) In this environment you choose to spend time with people who will “open doors” for you. Your friendships and social relationships are often, usually, or always based on their usefulness for reaching your economic and social goals.
  - c) In other words, the people you network with and relate to are not persons (subjects) but objects. They are means to ends.

- But the Trinitarian/Christian view of reality tells us that relationships are ends in themselves. We are not to use others.
- A Christian counter-culture must be a place where relationships do not work like that.
  - a) We are not to gravitate only toward the people who are more attractive, more connected, more powerful.
  - b) We are not to relate to people in order to further our own personal agendas.

<sup>1</sup> But the LORD said to Samuel, "Do not consider his appearance or his height, for I have rejected him. The LORD does not look at the things man looks at. Man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart." (1 Sam 16:7); Your beauty should not come from outward adornment, such as braided hair and the wearing of gold jewelry and fine clothes. Instead, it should be that of your inner self, the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight. (1 Pet 3:3-4)

## BIBLE STUDY

Ephesians 2:14-22

**1. vv.19-22. Meditate on the different images Paul uses. What does each of the three images tell us about Christian unity and community?****Fellow citizens with God's people — verse 19a**

- Here we are called a new nation.
- Our relationship to each other in Christ is to be stronger than our relationship to other members of our racial and national groups.
  - a) When you become a Christian, you are not primarily from Ohio or Germany or Asia; you are not primarily Anglo, African-American, Asian, Hispanic; you are not primarily white collar or blue collar.
  - b) You are primarily a co-citizen of God's nation.

**Members of God's household — verse 19b**

- This means, moreover, that we are adopted into God's family; we are brought into his home.
- We are not only citizens, but sons and daughters, brothers and sisters.

**In him... a holy temple... built together, a dwelling of God the Spirit – verses 21, 22**

- We are a building, in which the glory of God's shekinah dwells bodily.
- His royal presence enters our lives and takes up residence in us.

*Each of the three images increases in intensity.*

- Each image exhibits a closer and more intimate relationship to God.
  - a) A king lives in the region with his people; a father lives in the same house with his children. But the Spirit actually lives inside the very temple.
- Each image exhibits a closer and more intimate relationship between the community members.
  - a) Citizens are tied by social contract, siblings by genetic code and upbringing, but stones of a temple are literally cemented to one another.

**2. Draw some practical implications for community. If we are a nation, a family and a temple, how should that effect the way we live?**

In general, the intensity of these images cannot be squared with merely attending church on Sunday — even regularly. These images imply a far deeper involvement in the church.

**A New Nation — Cross-cultural**

This image implies that:

- We are making close friends with people from groupings, classes or races who, apart from the gospel, we'd never know or care to know.
- We are Christian *first* and white or black or Asian, second. We are Christian first and rich or poor or middle class, second.
- We do not let our old class divisions divide us.

**A Family — Personal Accountability**

This image implies that:

- We do not simply "have meetings" but we share many of the basic activities of life with other believers — eating together, recreation, prayer, spending time, sharing homes and possessions.
- We are letting our whole lives be in contact with whole lives of some other Christians.
- You are accountable personally to some others. You have shared enough about your sins, and you spend enough time with others so that people really see whether you are growing in Christ.

**A Spiritual Temple of the Spirit — Corporate Spirituality**

This implies that:

- We are praying with others and letting them see how you really feel about God. It is *together* that we are inhabited. Your spirituality is no longer private.
- We experience God *with* other people with some consistency.

**3. vv.14-16. What is Paul saying in this particular image? How does this statement relate to the claim in 1 Peter 2:9 that we are a “chosen people... a holy nation?”**

Here is the most remarkable image of all. *“His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two.”* (v.15)

- Even if not motivated to gender neutral language, the better translation would probably be: *“His purpose is to create a new humanity.”* (Greek – kainon anthropon)
- Amazing! Paul is saying that we are called to be a new human race — a new way of being human beings together, a new social order.

This fits in entirely with the claim that Christians are to be the alternate “city of God” (Matthew 5:14-16) and that we are *“a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light”* (1 Peter 2:9).

- When Peter calls us a *“holy nation”* he is saying, literally, that we are a distinct, unique, “spiritual ethnic.”
  - a) A club or association is a group of people united by one or two commonalities — e.g. a tennis club.
  - b) But an “ethnic” is a culture, a group of people who have distinct, common ways of doing nearly everything, from moral values to a sense of humor.
- The word “holy” means “distinct,” and thus Peter is saying that the gospel so changes every part of our lives that it lifts us somewhat out of our original cultures, giving us some critical distance from it and non-believers in it.
- When we believe the gospel we receive a profound union with others who believe, even though they may be radically different from us in every other way.
- So, just as Jesus said, Christians are an alternate city in every city.
- And, as Peter says, we are an alternate nation and culture in every nation and culture.



So we are not simply a fellowship of warm individual relationships, but a counter-culture in which we help each other become distinctive in everything we do:

- a) how we use money and possessions
- b) how we conduct relationships and family life
- c) how we do our work, and so on.

## READINGS

Read & mark: "?" – Question raised; "!" – Insight helpful

*"Let us have no vainglory — provoking one another, envying of one another. (Gal 5:26). This verse shows that our conduct to others is determined by our opinion of ourselves. It is when we have [“vain-glory”] that we... adopt one of these two attitudes. If we regard ourselves as superior we “provoke” (the Greek word means ‘to challenge’)... but if we regard ourselves as inferior we “envy.” In both cases our attitude is due to “vainglory” or “conceit,” to our having such a fantasy opinion of ourselves... Very different is that love which is the fruit of the Spirit... The Holy Spirit has opened their eyes to see both their own sin and unworthiness and also the importance and value of... people in the sight of God.*

– J. Stott <sup>1</sup>

Those who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they cling not only to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ... Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free... to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes, as Paul suggests (I Cor 9:19-23) and is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures

– Richard Lovelace <sup>2</sup>

In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him "to myself" now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true friendship is the least jealous of loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth... we possess each friend not less but more as the number of those with whom we share him increases. In this, Friendship exhibits a glorious "nearness by resemblance" to Heaven... for every soul, seeing Him in her own way, communicates that unique vision to all the rest. That, says an old author, is why the Seraphim in Isaiah's vision are crying, "Holy, Holy, Holy" to one another (Is 6:3). The more we share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall all have,

– C. S. Lewis <sup>3</sup>

If the Church is to be effective and advocate a new [kingdom]order... it must itself be a new social order... The local congregation... stands not primarily as the promoter of programs for social change (although it will be that) but primarily as itself the foretaste of a different social order. Its actions for justice and peace will be, and will be seen to be, the overflow of a life in Christ, where God's justice and God's peace are already an experienced treasure.

– Lesslie Newbigin <sup>4</sup>

The church is... made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together... because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ... They are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake.

– D. Carson <sup>5</sup>

**Application questions****1. Which statements impressed you and why?****2. Consider the Stott quote. "Vainglory" (Greek kenodoxos) literally means empty of glory or significance. How does the gospel heal this condition and therefore lay a basis for renewed human relationships?**

Our natural condition is to be "glory-empty," starved for significance, honor and a sense of worth. This condition is rooted in sin.

- As Paul says, though we want to be our own masters, at the deepest level we know there is a God that we should be living for. Therefore we suppress and repress the knowledge that we are not living as we ought (Rom 1:18-20).
- This guilt subconsciously influences us in all we do.
  - a) Sin makes us feel both superior (because we are trying to prove to ourselves and others that we are significant) and inferior (because at a deep level we feel guilty and insecure).
- In different people these deep currents express themselves in different ways.
  - a) Some people's "glory-emptiness" takes the form of bravado and pride; some people's "glory-emptiness" takes the form of self-deprecation and self-loathing.
  - b) Most of us are in the middle, wracked by both impulses.

The gospel, however, creates a whole new self-image which is not based on comparisons with others (Galatians 5:26, 6:3-5).

- We do not earn our worth through approval *from* people or through power *over* people.
- So on the one hand, we are not over-dependent on the approval of others, nor on the other hand, are we afraid of commitment and connection to others.

The gospel makes us neither self-confident nor self-disdaining, but both bold and humble at once.

- To the degree I am still functionally earning my worth through performance (i.e. to the degree I am still functioning in works-righteousness), to that degree I will be either operating out of superiority or inferiority.
- Why? Because if I am saved by my works, then I can either be confident but not humble (if I am living up) or humble but not confident (if I am not living up).
- In other words, apart from the gospel, I will be forced to be superior or inferior or to swing back and forth or to be one way with some people and another way with others. I am continually caught between these two ways, because of the nature of my self-image.

So the gospel humbles me before anyone, telling me I am a sinner saved only by grace. But it also emboldens me before anyone, telling me I am loved and honored by the only eyes in the universe that really count.

The gospel gives a boldness and a humility that do not "eat each other up," but can increase together.

This radically changes all my relationships.

- Jonathan Edwards says that until we have experienced grace, everything we do is out of self-love.
  - a) We don't work for the sake of the work, we don't relate for the sake of the person.
  - b) We are doing it all to bolster our own self-image, to derive it, essentially from others.
  - c) So my relationships are all about me.
- But when the gospel changes me, I relate to others for their sakes. I can enjoy someone for who they are in themselves, not for how they make me feel about myself.
- Until the gospel changes us, we are generally using people in relationships.
- And until the gospel changes us, we have a very narrow range for our relationships.

- a) We are capable of reciprocity and mutuality only with people a lot like us.
- b) When we meet anyone who is much better than us (socially, economically, mentally, physically) or much worse than us — the sharp dynamics of superiority and inferiority kick into play.
- c) We are intimidated or disdainful.

**3. Consider the Lewis and Carson quotes. a) How have you learned new things about Christ from your community with other believers? b) Share some personal testimonies of how you have seen the gospel bring together some natural enemies.**

**4. Consider the Lovelace quote. How does the gospel help us overcome cultural barriers?**

One of the most important ways that the Christian church embodies the gospel is in the unity of Christians who are different from one another — temperamentally, culturally and racially.

- In general, the job of the church is to show the world that people who cannot live in love and unity outside of Christ *can* do so in Christ. But this is far easier said than done!
- When it comes to building actual relationships across racial and cultural barriers we quickly come up against a host of attitudes, rooted deeply in our own cultural customs and ways of thinking, that make it hard to accept and respect people of other groups.
- Some of these attitudes and ways of thinking are implicitly or explicitly racist — assigning moral significance to cultural differences.
- We tend to think of our differences from other cultures as one of merit. Lovelace explains how the gospel works

**The spiritual roots of racism**

Ultimately, racism is a form of works-righteousness, one way we deal with life without the gospel. The structure of sin has the following outline (based on Genesis 3 and Romans 1).

- Sin is a proud independence in which we seek to be our own God, and to create a secure life independent of him.
- But because we were built to worship and know him, this effort at independence creates a sense of anxiety and shame.
- In response, we “cover our nakedness” and insecurity with some self-justifying belief system. We substitute some other ultimate value on which we now (frantically) seek as a way to justify our existence, feel acceptable and worthwhile.
- This self-justifying system very commonly involves morality and religion itself (remember F. O’Connor’s character of whom it was said: *“he knew... the way to avoid Jesus was to avoid sin”*).
  - a) Another common self-justifying system is one’s culture and race. It is a way to feel superior and to cover up the sense of our nakedness.

**The healing of racism**

Dealing with racism is multi-faceted — it takes both personal and corporate effort. It entails both a change of attitudes and of social structures. But healing racism at the fundamental level will only happen when the gospel penetrates the heart.

- In Acts 10-11, God showed Peter that anyone, regardless of race and culture, was equally lost in sin and equally loved in Christ because salvation is totally by grace.
  - a) Cornelius was brought into salvation not by his pedigree but by Christ’s pedigree.
- Yet sometime later Paul saw Peter refusing to eat with Gentile Christians, and he confronted him about his racism.
- He did not say, “You are breaking the rule against racism.” He said, “They were not acting in line with the gospel” (Gal.2:14).
  - a) To act “in line with the gospel” is to take the fact that we are sinners saved by sheer grace and draw out the implications and live in total consistency with that.
- Racial prejudice is wrong because it is a denial of the very principle of grace vs. works.

This means that gradually, the gospel transforms our identity.

- Identity is a set of layers, for we are many things.
  - a) Our occupation, our ethnic identity, etc. are all part of “who we are.”
- But we assign different values to these components and thus Christian maturing is a process in which the most fundamental layer of our identity becomes our self-understanding as a new creature in Christ along with all our privileges in him.

For example, a person may have an identity like the following, with the most important and fundamental identity trait (at the bottom) being his status as a professional and a lawyer, and the less important traits being at the top.

——Lutheran——

——Father——

——Republican——

——German——

——Lawyer——

But Christian conversion will change the layers and identity structure.

Sometime after conversion the identity may look like this (again, with the most fundamental factors being at the bottom:

——Republican——

——German——

——Lawyer——

——Father——

——Christian (Lutheran version)

As our Christianity “moves down” in our identity, we find ourselves less shaken by professional, social and relational changes.

- We are less driven at work.
- We overcome racial prejudices, and become more open-minded about politics, etc.



- But Christianity does, in a sense, lift us a bit out of our ethnic and political identities and give us some distance and an ability to critique our groups in a way we didn't have before, and in a way other members of our group may not be able.

This fundamental gospel change is the key to being the alternate city that Jesus wants us to be!

- How can white Americans and black Americans get over the superiority-inferiority thing after all these years?
- How can middle class people really serve the poor?
- How can highly individualistic Western people stop asking ourselves continually about every event or setting, "What am I getting out of this?"
- How can they begin to overcome their fierce desire for privacy and freedom and become accountable to and responsible for others?
- How can we get over being so touchy, always being offended or having feelings hurt?
- How can we get over our fear of involvement and begin confronting people whose behavior is clearly self-defeating?

The answer to each question is the gospel of justification by Christ and not us, and by the cross, not power.

- If our community life is not characterized by these things (and it really isn't), then we have to return to, reflect upon, and pray the gospel into our hearts until it has its effect.
- If we don't have community characterized by these things, we may say we believe the gospel, but we don't. We don't really believe it. We are not hearing it.

**5. Consider the Newbigin quote. Brainstorm practical ways in which your own small group can deepen its life together as a close-knit family, and shape its life together as a distinctive Christian counter-culture.**

**Deepening Our Life Together****Common time**

Community requires availability.

- Σ You must not be too hard for others to get in touch with.

Community requires frequency.

- Σ There must be plenty of time shared together regularly.

**Common practices**

Community requires variety of practice:

- eating together
- recreation and often 'keeping Sabbath' together
- learning together (Bible study, reading and reflection in genera,)
- personal counsel, comfort, and specific accountability for behavior
- commitment to constant reconciliation and forgiveness
- deeds of service and justice and witness done together
- prayer, worship, and making music together

Therefore, community requires spontaneity as well as structured time together.

- You do last minute spontaneous things together. If that cannot happen, there is no availability, frequency and variety.

**Common resources**

- Share home and living space through hospitality with others.
- Share economic and talent resources and feel a sense of responsibility to others in your shared place

**Common place**

- For all of the above to happen, there has to be a new identification of and with a specific geographic area. That is, you must, as much as possible, stay in your community.
- Practical costs:
  - a) live near where you work
  - b) don't move so often
  - c) coordinate with all believers in your geography

**Shaping Our Life Together as a Distinctive Counter-Culture**

1. The church should study and agree on ways that Christians are being molded into the world's shape in the areas of sexuality and marriage, money and materialism, power and social relationship. Then they should begin to bring their practices more in line with what the Scripture says.
2. The church needs to become as multi-ethnic as possible. This is a big subject, and the phrase "as possible" is easily misunderstood.
  - a) There are many civic communities that are so homogeneous that the churches there could not expect to be multi-ethnic.
  - b) Nevertheless, it is clear in Ephesians 2 and elsewhere that one of the ways the church is a counter-culture is that it shows how the races and cultures can be unified in Christ.
3. The church needs to agree to be a sign of the kingdom through ministries of compassion, service and justice that work for the common good of the broader community, not just for the believers within the church. This is one important way in which we are a city "*on a hill*."
  - a) Many religious communities take care of their own.
  - b) We are to show the world a new way of life based on the cross and sacrificial service.
4. The church should work to bring gospel-theology to bear on the so-called secular vocations.
  - a) We need to ask, "How does the gospel bring the believer in business and the arts, the academy, the media, government, etc, to work in a distinctive way?"
  - b) This again is a huge subject, but the church is not building a counter-culture unless it seeks to disciple believers for distinctively Christian cultural leadership, not just church leadership.

- 1 John Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (IVP, 1968) pp.156-157.
- 2 Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (IVP, 1979) pp. 198-199.
- 3 C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Harcourt and Brace, 1971) p.61-62.
- 4 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Eerdmans)
- 5 D.A.Carson, *Love In Hard Places* (Crossway, 2002) p. 61.

# Gospel Christianity

## How do we know about Jesus?

### Study 9 | Course 1

Virtually everything we know about God and Christ is from the Bible. But why should we believe it, and how do we understand what it says?

#### KEY CONCEPT – BIBLE

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

#### **Why we should believe it**

Many say that the Biblical accounts of Jesus are legendary and can't be trusted. There are three insurmountable problems with this view.

##### **The timing is too early to be legend.**

- Legends are written down centuries after all living eyewitnesses are gone. But Mark and Luke wrote just 30-40 years after the death of Jesus.
- If Jesus did *not* feed a crowd of thousands, you might get away with claiming he did after 200 years, but not after only 30 years when hundreds of witnesses still lived.
- These accounts were circulated too soon to be fabricated.

##### **The content is too counter-productive to be legend.**

- It is typical to say that the followers of Jesus made up stories of his life to promote their movement. But why make up a story that:
  - a) Jesus died on a cross crying out that God had forsaken him?
  - b) In Gethsemane he wished he could avoid the cross?
  - c) The first eyewitnesses of the resurrection were women?
- All of these elements were highly offensive to all first century readers. The only historically plausible reason that these incidents would be put in these accounts is that they happened.

##### **The literary form is too detailed to be legend.**

- In John 21, the disciples catch 153 fish.
- In John 8, Jesus doodles with his finger in the dust, though we are never told what he wrote.

- Ancient legends never included such details, which contribute nothing to plot or character.
- Modern realistic narrative fiction began only about 400 years ago.
- The only reason an ancient writer would include 153 fish was that it was part of the eyewitness account. Someone had remembered it.

**How we should interpret it.**

If Jesus is divine, we should read the Bible as he did.

**Jesus read the Bible as God's word so that "what Scripture says, God says."**

- He read the Bible as:
  - a) supernatural revelation (Jn 5:37-39; Mt 19:4-5)
  - b) inspired in every single part (Jn 10:34-35; Mt 5:17,19)
  - c) authoritative and "unbreakable" (John 10:35; Mk 7:1-13)
  - d) sufficient for salvation (Lk 16:15-31; Jn 5:39-40)
- He based even the smallest details of his life on the Scripture (John 19:28).

**Jesus read the Bible as being all about himself (Lk 24:44-45; Jn 5:39-46).**

- Every part of the Bible tells us something about Jesus and about how God redeems us through him.
  - a) Jesus is the true Adam who passed the test in the garden.
  - b) He is the true Moses who leads us out of slavery.
  - c) He is the true Job — the innocent sufferer who intercedes for his friends.
  - d) He is the true David, whose victory becomes his people's, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it.

**In the end, there are only two ways to read the Bible; is it basically about me or basically about Jesus?**

- Is it basically a set of moral principles — about what I must do?
- Or is it basically the story of Jesus — about what he has done?
  - a) Unless I see his ultimate generosity — giving everything up for me on the cross — I won't have the security or incentive to be generous with my money.

b) Unless I see him forgiving me on the cross, I won't have what it takes to forgive others.

- As only principles of living, the Bible is a crushing burden.
- The Bible is not primarily a "book of virtues." It is the story of how God is redeeming us through Jesus Christ.

### 1. Which statements impressed you and why?

### 2. Think of the Biblical account of David and Goliath. If you look at the story in itself, apart from the rest of the Bible — then what is its main message or teaching to the reader? If you look at the story as part of the Bible's overall story — about how God saves us by grace through Christ — then what is its main message or teaching?

The well-known story of David and Goliath is a stirring account of courage and faith in God in the face of overwhelming odds. David is just a youth and has no great physical prowess or military might, but he is still able to slay the giant.

- In itself, the story is a clarion call to the reader to be brave, to have faith in God, and to face the giants of life steadfastly.
- But if we study an individual Bible story without seeing how it fits into *the* Bible story (about how God is saving the world through Christ), we actually change the meaning of the particular event for *us*.
  - a) It becomes a moralistic exhortation to "try harder" rather than a call to live by faith in the work of Christ.
- If I read David and Goliath as basically an example, then the story is really about me. I must summons up the faith and courage to fight the giants in my life.

But there is another way to read it. We have to ask, “Why did the Holy Spirit have this account preserved in the Bible?” Jesus tells us (in Luke 24—see below) that everything in the Scriptures is there because it tells us something about him and our salvation.

- David was Jesus’ forefather. Let’s ask the question: “How does David reveal to us something of the *ultimate* King and deliverer, Jesus?”
- As soon as we begin to answer that story — to put it into *the* Biblical story — we notice many striking similarities:
  - a) Like David, Jesus came to his task of deliverance not strong but weak.
  - b) Like David, Jesus fought in the place of the people he was trying to deliver so that his victory became their victory! (Rather than the two armies fighting a full battle, each side put forth a “champion,” a representative. If your army’s champion wins the fight, the whole nation wins the battle.)
  - c) So like David, Jesus saves his people by grace, giving them a victory that they didn’t raise a finger themselves to earn.
- But unlike David, Jesus did all this not merely at the risk of his life, but at the cost of his life. And unlike David, Jesus did all this not merely to deliver us from the giant of physical captivity, but from the giant of sin and death itself.

Of course the story is a call to be courageous, but if I read the account of David and Goliath as *primarily* showing me salvation through Jesus, then the story is not just about me, but about him. And if I read it this way, I not only have a call to be courageous, but I receive the power to do so.

- To the degree I rejoice and grasp deeply that Jesus fought the real giants (sin, law, death) *for* me — the only giants that can truly hurt me — I will never have the courage to be able to fight ordinary giants in life (suffering, disappointment, failure, criticism, hardship).
- The Bible is not a collection of “Aesop’s Fables;” it is not a book of virtues.
- It is a story about how God saves us. If we read it as primarily about Jesus, we will get the power to live like him.



## BIBLE STUDY #1

2 Peter 1:16-21

**1. Who is Peter referring to in vv.16-18? Who is he referring to in vv.19-21?**

In vv.16-18, he is talking about "we," the apostles.

- While he does not name names, it is clear he is referring to Jesus' disciples who heard what he said and saw what he did in his lifetime on earth. In other words, he is talking about the authors of the New Testament.
- The New Testament was written either by Jesus' apostles (John, Matthew, Paul, Peter) or by associates who ministered with the apostles (Luke, Mark).
- When Peter wrote, these accounts had not yet been gathered into a single book or volume. At that time, they circulated among the churches as individual documents, as authoritative accounts of Christian teaching and the life of Jesus.

In vv.19-21, he is talking about the Old Testament authors, "the prophets."

- In v.20, we see he is talking of the prophets' words that had been preserved in the written Scriptures.

**2. What claims does Peter make about the testimony of the New Testament writers and the Old Testament writers?**

The testimony of the New Testament writers

In vv.16-18, he insists that their accounts were not fabrications, not "*cleverly invented stories*." Rather, their accounts are "*eyewitness*" testimony. "*We ourselves heard... were with him...*" (v.18).

- It is interesting that Peter, within his own lifetime, had to counter claims that the accounts of Jesus' life that were the basis of the church were not historically accurate but "slyly invented" stories.
- In no uncertain terms he contradicts those who make such claims.

- a) It is interesting to note that he does so by telling the story of Jesus' transfiguration, perhaps the most overtly supernatural event in the life of Jesus outside of the Resurrection itself.
- b) This probably indicates that those who questioned the apostle's accounts were ready to accept Jesus as a great human teacher, but not as the supernatural, incarnate Son of God.
- Today a significant number of Protestant churches have bought into the very concepts that Peter forcefully rejects.
- a) They believe that the gospels are filled with legendary material and that Jesus may have been a great teacher, but no more.

#### The testimony of the Old Testament writers

Peter says that the prophetic word has been made "*more certain*" (v.19).

- Most commentators believe he means that the transfiguration confirmed the Old Testament Scriptures when Moses and Elijah appeared with Christ.
- Christ is the fulfillment and proof that the prophets spoke truly.

Peter says that the Scripture now is our "light"—that is, tells us the will of God — until in the last time, Jesus returns (cf. Numbers 24:17; 1 Cor 13:12) and we will not need the Scripture any more.

- This is quite a claim! The Bible is the main way (till the end) that we get "light" or knowledge from God.

The last statement is a very direct claim that the words of the Scripture writers were not ultimately their own ideas, but that the Holy Spirit "*spoke from God* as they were *carried along*" by the Holy Spirit (v.21).

- This could hardly be a stronger expression of the authority of the Bible. It gives us a principle — whatever the Scripture says — God says. It is a categorical statement of divine authority of the Bible.
- Peter is not the only person with that view!
  - a) In Matt.19:4-5, Jesus quotes the author of Genesis 2:24 as the words of God.
  - b) In Acts 4:25, Luke shows us David's Psalm 2 being quoted as the words of the Holy Spirit. (See also Galatians 3:8).

- c) This has been called the “plenary” inspiration of the Scripture, namely, that every single part of the Scripture has equal divine authority.
- It is common to say today, “I accept what Jesus said, but not what Paul said.” But Jesus, Paul and Peter understood that it is not just Moses or just David or just Jesus that speaks with the authority of God, but the Scripture itself — the whole of the Bible in all its parts.

## BIBLE STUDY #2

Luke 24:13-27, 44-49

**1. What do you learn about the Bible in vv. 13-27?**

The two disciples, when they review the career of Jesus, put the word “but” between his crucifixion and his redemption (v.20-21). They were saying, “He was crucified but we thought he would redeem.” In other words, they thought that his death had thwarted his redemptive work.

- At this point, Jesus rebukes them. “How slow of heart to believe... did not the Christ have to suffer...?” They didn’t see his death as part of his redemptive work.
- Why were they so blind? He says they did not believe “all the prophets have spoken!” (v.25)
- Again in v.27, Luke tells us that he told them what was said about the Messiah in “all the Scriptures.”
  - a) Jesus saw the Old Testament as being necessary to put his work into context and to make its meaning clear.
  - b) The Old Testament themes of law, sacrifice, priesthood, and the temple all throw the career of Christ into relief.

Jesus’ use of the Bible here is extremely telling.

- It demonstrates the Bible’s authority and reliability.
  - a) This shows how seriously Jesus took the Bible. He based all he did and every part of his life and career on the Scripture.
  - b) He faced every major crisis in his life by apprehending and quoting the Scripture: his temptation (Matthew 4); his betrayal (Matt.26:52-54); and his death on the cross.
  - c) This shows that his deepest reflexes were to believe and rely on the Bible.
- It shows that the Bible in its entirety is all about Jesus, even the Old Testament.
- It shows that the basic message of the Bible is that the Messiah has to suffer.

- a) This means that it is a fatal mistake to read the Bible as a set of moral philosophy. The Emmaus disciples had read the Bible as a book of morality — of how to save themselves, instead of as good news about a Messiah who would come and die and rise in order to save them.
- b) The point of his teaching is “suffer... and then... glory” (v.26).
- c) I Peter 1:11 summarizes the teaching of the Bible in the same way. Everything shows that the Christ had to suffer in order to reach glory, that suffering and glory were not incompatible, but rather suffering leads to glory, death to resurrection.
- In other words, the Bible is not primarily a set of rules or a philosophy of life.
  - a) If it is, then Mark Twain’s nightmares about the Bible pressing down on him, crushing him, would be fair. It would be an intolerable burden.
- Rather, Jesus is telling us here that the Bible is primarily a report of what our peril is, of what God has planned to do about it, and about what he has done about it in history through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.
- Thus the Bible is a “gospel.”
  - a) In Jesus’ day, a “gospel” was an announcement brought by a herald of some great event — not a philosophy or a self-improvement course.
  - b) It is not that the Bible does not contain much moral philosophy, but it is based on the gospel of the sufferings and glory of the Messiah.
  - c) For example, a herald would never come crying, “Crime does not pay! Be good!” but he might come crying, “Crime does not pay, because the true king has triumphed and is on his way!”
- So Jesus shows us a whole new way to approach the Bible and thus God.
- Becoming a Christian is not taking up a new interest or course of study and behavior. It is building one’s life on the report of a historical intervention.

## 2. What do we learn about the Bible in general from Jesus' teaching time with the disciples in Luke 24:44-49?

The scope of his teaching is the entire Old Testament. Every single part is about him. This is clearly seen in v.44, where it says he was written about in "the Law of Moses, the Prophets, and the Psalms."

- Now traditionally, the Old Testament is considered to have three parts — the Law (the 5 books of Moses), the Prophets, and the Wisdom literature (here referred to by its chief book, the Psalms).
- Thus Jesus sees himself as the fulfillment of it all. Literally everything in the Bible is about him. The Bible can only be understood if it seen to be about him.
  - a) Jesus fulfills the Prophets, who said the Messiah will be God (Isaiah 9:6), and will suffer and be killed (Isaiah 53).
  - b) He fulfills all the ceremonial law since he is the sacrifice, the priest and the temple to which all the ritual pointed.
  - c) He fulfills the moral law itself for he alone lived it personally, exemplifying righteousness, and doing it all as our substitute, satisfying it for us.
  - d) He even fulfills all the history of the Bible: he is the true prophet, the true priest, the true king to which all prophets, priests and kings point.
    - i. He is the seed of Abraham, David's greater son, the true Jonah greater than Jonah, the true Solomon greater than Solomon.
    - ii. In fact, he is the true Israel, a remnant of one. When Hosea talks of the Exodus from Egypt he says, "Out of Egypt have I called my son" (Hos. 11:1) referring to the people of Israel. But Matthew quotes this to refer to Jesus (Matt.2:15) because Jesus is the true remnant — he alone kept the law with all his heart, soul, strength, and he alone inherits the blessings promised to Abraham.
    - iii. Only those united to him get the promises of Israel (Gal. 3:6-25; 4:21-31).
- In other words, everything in the Bible is about Jesus.

The implications of this are vast. The disciples cannot be witnesses to the gospel until they understand that the whole Bible is about him. Why?

- We can either read the Bible as primarily about us (what we have to do for him) or primarily about him (what he had to do for us).
- We can understand salvation primarily as what we give God or primarily as what God gives us.
- If we understand that the Bible is basically about God's work of salvation, then we will see it talking about that provision everywhere.
- That is "good news" and it gives us a message to proclaim.

## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

I have read in Plato and Cicero sayings that are very wise and very beautiful; but I never read in either of them “*Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden.*”

– Augustine <sup>1</sup>

I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this. Of this [gospel] text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage... or else, some unknown [ancient] writer... without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic, realistic narrative... The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned how to read.

– C.S. Lewis <sup>2</sup>

Paul described [the Scripture] as “*inspired*” (2 Tim 3:15-17) that is, entirely “God-breathed” — a product of God’s Spirit (“breath”). Truth in the Bible means stability, reliability, firmness, trustworthiness, the quality of a person who is entirely self-consistent, sincere, realistic, undeceived. God is such a person: truth, in this sense, is his nature, and he has not got it in him to be anything else. That is why he cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Heb 6:18). That is why his words to us are true, and cannot be other than true. They are the index of reality: they show us things as they really are. [But] the word which God addresses directly to us is an instrument not only of government but also of fellowship. He made us with the intention that we might walk together forever in a love relationship. But such a relationship can exist only when the parties know something of each other. God, our Maker, knows all about us before we say anything; but we can know nothing of him unless he tells us. Therefore, God sends his word... to woo us as well as to instruct us.

– J. I. Packer <sup>3</sup>

All Bible readers should learn the basic principles for interpreting it. First, we look for the *natural, original* meaning of the text, remembering that the plain and obvious meaning is sometimes not literal but figurative... We have to avoid reading our... thoughts back into the mind of the authors. The key questions are what they themselves intended to say and how they will have been understood by their contemporaries. For this we will need to know something about the historical and cultural background of the Bible. Secondly... we look for the *general* meaning. That is, we must interpret each text in the light both



of its immediate context in the book concerned and of its wider context in the Bible as a whole... We will be right to seek harmony by allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture... and not "so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another." (The Thirty-Nine Articles)

– J. Stott <sup>4</sup>

There are great stories in the Bible... but it is possible to know Bible stories, yet miss the Bible story... The Bible has a story line. It traces an unfolding drama. The story follows the history of Israel, but it does not begin there, nor does it contain what you would expect in a national history....If we forget the story line... we cut the heart out of the Bible. Sunday school stories are then told as tamer versions of the Sunday comics, where Samson substitutes for Superman. David... becomes a Hebrew version of Jack the Giant Killer. No, David is not a brave little boy who isn't afraid of the big bad giant. He is the Lord's anointed... God chose David as a king after his own heart in order to prepare the way for David's great Son, our Deliverer and Champion...

– E. Clowney <sup>5</sup>

### Application questions

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?**

**2. Why, as Packer says, is belief in the authority of the Bible important in order to have a personal relationship with the Lord?**

Most people find the idea of a living, intimate, personal relationship with God extremely attractive. But if you are going to have a personal relationship with anyone, there has to be genuine communication. And part of that communication will be the ability to contradict you.

- For example, if a wife is never able to contradict her husband, the relationship is artificial or mechanical (e.g. “The Stepford Wives”) not personal.
- Now, if you pick and choose what you can believe in the Bible and what you can’t believe (on the basis of modern thinking or personal feelings), then how will you ever have a God who can contradict your deepest beliefs?
- Only if God can be or say things that outrage you, will you know you have a real God and not a figment of your imagination.
- So an authoritative Bible is not the enemy of a personal, mystical relationship with God — it is the pre-condition.

**3. Someone may say: “You say we believe the Bible because Jesus does — but the only place I know this is from the Bible! That is circular reasoning!” Formulate an answer.**

Christians believe the divine inspiration of the Bible because Jesus taught and believed in the Bible’s entire inspiration and trustworthiness (John 5:37-39, 46-47; 10:34; Matthew 5:17, 19; 19:4-5).

- Almost no one can doubt that Jesus, as a first century Jew, believed in the authority of every verse of the Bible. Our belief in the authority of the Bible is, therefore, based on the authority of Jesus.
- If we believe he was who he said he was, then we must accept the entire Bible as God’s word. We can’t take on his Lordship and then fail to follow him in this regard.
- And remember — Jesus did not simply believe the Bible, but his mind was saturated with the Scripture by which he guided and regulated every step and inch of his life.

But then the question comes: “How can we know what Jesus believed and taught — except from the Bible?” Are we now stuck in a vicious logical circle? Don’t we have to believe in Jesus to believe in the Bible — and yet also have to believe in the Bible to believe in Jesus?

No, we are not trapped in a logical or practical conundrum. Instead we can proceed in the following way.

1. As we noted above, there is strong evidence that the Biblical accounts of Jesus are not legends, but are reliable historical documents that give us a picture of things Jesus said and did. (You can’t “prove” the

authority of the Bible, but there is plenty of evidence that the gospels are as reliable as any other ancient historical document.)

2. On the basis of what we read about Jesus, we must decide whether he is the Son of God as he claimed to be. If you do come to believe that he is...
3. ...you will accept the Bible as the Word of God, because Jesus did.

So what *level* of trust in the Bible do we need in order to proceed from A to C?

- Do we need to believe in the inspiration and authority of the Bible in order to learn about Jesus? No. We just need to believe in the general and basic historical reliability of the texts.
- Once the historical reliability for the Bible is established, then the traditional and central questions — “Who is Jesus? Did he rise from the dead?” — can be asked.
- To paraphrase C. S. Lewis, Jesus could only be one of three possibilities: 1) Liar, 2) Lunatic, 3) or Lord.

**Note:**

Some people you speak to may say, “But these *could not* be historically reliable accounts because they have miracles in them! We can’t believe in miracles today.” But you might ask:

- The issue is not “can miracles happen?” The issue is, “Is there a personal God?”
- For if there is a God, then miracles are only logical. Unless you are sure there is no God (and that is a faith-commitment — it can’t be proven!) you can’t rule out the possibility of miracles.
- There is an intellectual inconsistency involved in objecting to the historicity of the gospels because they contain miracles.
  - a) The only way we would know of a miracle is if someone has seen one and gives an account of it.
  - b) So if you assume that any account of a miracle is untrue simply because it describes a miracle, then you are assuming there are no miracles before you examine any evidence for them.
  - c) You are viciously arguing in a circle. “Miracles cannot happen, therefore, miracles have not happened.”
  - d) If you say, “I reject any document as unhistorical if it contains miracles,” you have a belief that cannot be disproved under any circumstances. That is a type of blind faith.

"When the Old Testament says that Sennacherib's invasion was stopped by angels (II Kings 19:35), and Herodotus says it was stopped by a lot of mice who came and ate up all the bowstrings of the whole army (Herodotus, Bk. II, Sect.141), an open-minded person will be on the side of the angels. Unless you start by begging the question [assuming miracles cannot happen] there is nothing intrinsically unlikely in the existence of angels or in the action described to them. But mice just don't do these things."

– C.S. Lewis

**4. Someone may say: "I don't believe in taking the Bible literally." Look at the Stott quote and formulate an answer.**

The idea of taking the Bible literally is something of a red herring. As John Stott notes, the only fair and responsible way to interpret the Bible (as with any text) is to seek to discover the original meaning of the author.

- For example, when you write a letter to a friend you use both figurative language (like when you are joking) as well as making literal statements — and you expect your friend to discern the difference in your intent.
  - a) So what if you said, "I'd like to wring his neck!" and your friend called the police to arrest you for attempted murder? You'd say: "You should have discerned that my intent was to speak figuratively!"
  - b) Or what if you said, "Please pay me back the \$500 dollars you lent me" and your friend does nothing, saying "I didn't want to read that request literally." Of course you would be quite put out!
  - c) You know that any objective reader would have been able to discern your intent. This illustrates that every writer expects readers to interpret the text by discerning the author's intent.

It is the same with the Bible. When we have a song or a poem, we expect figurative language.

- When Deborah composes a song about a great battle and says that the stars in the heavens came and fought against the Syrians (Judges 5:20) we know she doesn't mean to be taken literally. (We can check her poetic account against the historical account of the battle in Judges 4.)
- And when Luke tells his readers that he has put together a historical, orderly account of Jesus' life (Luke 1:1-4), he is telling us that his account is not poetic but historical.

a) It is quite unfair to decide that you want to take the Resurrection accounts as symbolic and figurative when Luke directly says they really happened.

- Most of the time, it is not very hard in the Bible to tell if the author is writing in poetic imagery or in historical narrative. There are of course some exceptions (like the book of Revelation!) and so there are plenty of places in the Scripture in which Christian people have honest differences about how to interpret a particular text.
- But no one — not even the most conservative Christians — simply always “takes the Bible literally.”

**5. Someone may say: “I don’t think it matters whether the gospels are a reliable history or not. All that matters is that I experience spiritual meaning when I read them.” Formulate an answer.**

This is maybe the greatest mistake of all.

- The central message of every other religion is, “You are saved by what you do, by living in this way.”
  - a) That means that ultimately, it doesn’t matter whether the incidents in the Buddhist or Muslim Scriptures really happened or not. It doesn’t matter whether Buddha or Muhammad did this or that miracle or not.
  - b) What saves us is not what they did but by what they said and taught. We are saved by following the path to God that they laid out.
- But the central message of the Christian documents is the very opposite of that. It is, “You are saved not by what you do, but by what he has done. He has entered history and lived the life we should have lived and died the death we should have died. This means atonement has been made. This means the kingdom of God has broken into the world and our lives, and will change the course of history.”
- In other words, if we are to be saved by grace, the historical events must have happened.
  - a) Ever notice how the gospels give 30-50% of their time to treat just the last week of Jesus life? What kind of biography spends that much time so disproportionately?
  - b) The gospel writers believed it wasn’t the example and teaching of Jesus, but his saving work in history for us — his death and resurrection — that saves us.

Therefore, the historical reliability of the gospels is crucial for the very message of grace. If you get spiritual meaning — a general inspiration — without understanding the central message, then you are settling for crumbs.

1 Quoted in Frank Mead, ed. *12,000 Religious Quotations* (Baker, 1989), p. 50.

2 Find it!

3 J. I. Packer *Concise Theology* (IVP, UK, 1993), p.4 and *Knowing God* (IVP, 1993) p.110, 113.

4 John Stott, *Christian Basics* (Baker, 1991).p.116.

5 Edmund Clowney, *The Unfolding Mystery* (Presbyterian and Reformed)

# Gospel Christianity

## Where do we live out the Gospel?

### Study 10 | Course 1

God wants us to embody and witness to his gospel and kingdom wherever we live. There is no more important place to do this than the city.

#### KEY CONCEPT – CITY

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

##### **The Original City – Creation**

God began history in a garden (Gen 2) but he will end it in a city (Rev 21-22). When Jesus is finished redeeming the world, it will be urban, a place of diversity, density and creativity. God through Christ is building a city (Heb 11:10). The idea of the city is therefore God’s invention. So originally —

- Cities were to be places of refuge and safety.

The city wall made life secure within (Ps 25:28; Neh 1:3-4). Cities were the best places for women and children, minorities, immigrants, and others with less power in a society.

- Cities were to be places of justice.

The city gate was the place where trials were conducted. Outside it was “every man for himself,” where conflicts were resolved with sheer power (Num 35:9-24; Pr 22:22).

- Cities were to be places where culture was forged.

The city market square was where the most numerous and diverse commercial, social, political and cultural connections could be made. From these interactions, new cultural movements were forged and flowed out to the rest of society.

- Cities were designed to be places of faith.

The city’s highest tower (castle, minaret, cathedral or office skyscraper) indicated the city’s faith — what most of the people are working for and looking to for their significance.

##### **The Broken City – Fall**

Today, the city is still the place of refuge for minorities, still the place where laws are made and enforced, still the main place culture is forged and disseminated, and still a place of great spiritual seeking and finding. But sin has broken cities so that none of the original purposes are being properly realized.

- The Bible denounces the cities as places of violence, injustice and unbelief (Micah 3:9-11).
- While the city still produces culture, it does so in a way that glorifies human beings or things rather than God.
- Should we abandon cities? No. The family and the church are also deeply marred and twisted by sin, but we don't discard them. We seek to rehabilitate them by the grace of God.

### God's Alternative City – Redemption

The "city of man" is built on the principle of individual self-aggrandizement. "*Let us make a name for ourselves*" (Gen 11:1-4). But God's city is built on service, not selfishness, and on bringing joy to the world with its cultural riches.

- Jesus established his church as a "city on a hill" which shows the world God's glory with its good deeds (Matt 5:14-17).
- Christians are called to be an alternative city within every earthly city, to show how sex, money and power can be used in non-destructive ways, and to show how people can get along in Christ who cannot get along outside of him.
- Thus the citizens of God's city are always the *best possible* citizens of their earthly city.

### Why be in the city?

Paul's mission centered on cities and ignored the countryside (cf. Acts 16:8-9 with v.12).

- Why? In the city
  - a) People were more open to new ideas
  - b) The centers of law, politics and art were more accessible
  - c) Every race and nationality could hear the truth.
- By 300 A.D., fifty percent of the city populations were Christian while the countryside was pagan (the word *paganus* probably meant "rural dweller").
- As the city goes, so goes all of society (eventually).
- So it is today. If a Christian can live in the city, it is (overall) the most strategic place to be.



**1. Which statements impressed you and why?****2. In light of the Biblical material above, formulate some answers to the following common objections to living in the city?****“The country is a wholesome influence on people; the city is morally corrupting.”**

U.S. society in general has developed a powerfully negative view of cities.

- They are seen as sources of corruption and evil, while rural settings are considered to be places of natural goodness.
- But it was from Rousseau and humanists that the influential concept of the “noble savage” arose — that people are good in their natural and pristine state, and only society “defiles” us and turns us bad.
- In reality, cities are the places where we see the very *best* and the very *worst* of what the human race can produce. The city is a magnifying glass that brings out whatever is in the human heart.

**“The country inspires faith and belief; spiritual faith dies in the city.”**

In fact, the city is a spiritual hotbed.

- New immigrants from other countries are far more open and accessible to the gospel than they were in their homelands.
- Younger people who flood the cities are also less set in their ways than older adults.
- The early Christian church largely was an urban movement because then, like today, the city affords more advantages to evangelism than non-urban areas, where people are not as open to new ideas, nor are there as many forums for getting the word out.

**“The city is not a good place to raise children.”**

There are very real financial issues (see below), but as a general rule cities are excellent places to rear children. Why?

- The city can keep families together more than the suburbs.

- a) Parents do not have a long commute to work.
- b) Because little children cannot simply run out and play all day, parents of younger kids are much more involved in the daily lives of their children.
- c) They are much more likely to travel together with their children and do recreation together as a family.
- Children raised in the city grow up to be extremely resourceful and self-reliant. At a fairly early age they learn to travel all around the city, whereas their contemporaries rely on their parents to drive them everywhere.
- Children in the city have a far greater range of races and cultures among their friends, and enjoy the energy and “so much to do” of the city.
- Generally speaking, teenage Christians see themselves more as members of urban churches, which are filled with younger adults, many of whom are very creative, talented, and ambitious.
- Suburban and small town churches are dominated by older couples and families that seem rather staid to teenagers. Christian kids raised in cities often have far more respect for the church.

It *is*, in general, more expensive to raise a family in a city (by about 15-20%). But many middle-class Christians who move to the city feel compelled to live only in what are far-and-away the most expensive neighborhoods. This is usually unnecessary. The financial cost of living in the city has to be weighed against all that we have been saying about the strategic advantage for ministry in the city.

**Final note:**

- It is quite possible that a family could not make a sufficient income in the city to meet its needs, and may find that employment elsewhere would be much better stewardship.
- It is important to encourage Christians to live in the city (or remain there longer than they planned!) but the Bible certainly does not command everyone to live here.
- When Christians opt to live elsewhere they should not feel (or be made to feel) that they are somehow moving out of the center of God’s mission in the world.
- God’s mission exists wherever people live and wherever Christians go.

## BIBLE STUDY

Jeremiah 29:1-14

After rebelling against its Babylonian overlords, Jerusalem was destroyed and the elite of Jewish society were taken to Babylon by force — the artisans and professionals and leaders (v.2). The prophet Jeremiah received a word from the Lord and wrote the exiles a letter.

**1. What wrong policies and attitudes toward the city were being promoted by the false prophets? (cf. vv.8-9 with vv.4-7). What parallels are there with Christians' policies and attitudes toward the city today?**

**Wrong Policies and Attitudes**

- God's denunciation of the false prophets in vv.8-9 comes immediately after his directions to settle and be involved in the city and to seek its peace (v.4-7) and their advice is contrasted with God's.
  - a) Therefore we conclude that the false prophets were telling the exiles the opposite of the directions of vv.4-7, namely, to stay detached and outside the city and to remain hostile to it.
- Most of the Jewish exiles at first settled outside the city of Babylon, near Nippur on the Kabar canal.
  - a) The prophets were encouraging them to stay separate and stick together and have as little to do with Babylonian society as possible.
  - b) They told them that the wicked Babylonians would soon be judged by God, and that they would be on their way home.
- To get the gist of what the prophets were promoting, see Jer.28:2ff, where Hananiah prophesies: *"Within two years I will bring back to this place... the exiles from Judah who went to Babylon... for I will break the yoke of the king of Babylon."*
- But Jeremiah contradicted this and said, *"It will be a long time. Therefore, build houses and settle down..."* (Jer.29:28).

**Parallels with Today**

- To a great degree Christians in America have a similar problem with the great cities of our country. We, too, are having trouble adjusting to the fact that we have lost ascendancy in our culture.
- In response, many leading voices encourage Christians to flee cities and to simply denounce the unbelieving society.

- This contrasts with God's advice to the Jews. He says that they need to grant calm, qualified respect to their pagan leaders and they are to become deeply involved in the city to serve it, not just denounce it.
- So, like misguided prophets, many Christian voices counsel believers to stay in their own enclaves and be detached from the city and to remain hostile to it.
  - a) They do so (as the Jews did) partly out of a denial of our true situation, partly out of a good desire to stay pure, and partly out of a superior, self-righteous regard of ourselves.
  - b) Many Christians today are like the prophets who insisted that God would soon deliver us from the terrible pagans in power.
  - c) There is no calm, qualified respect for the fact of their power or for the reality of our exile.
- We too are missing the call of God to us to admit our exile and come into the city and become deeply involved in it.

**2. What specific directions does God give the exiles on how to relate to the city of Babylon in vv.4-7? How can we apply these to ourselves today in the city?**

**General directions**

*A positiveness toward the city – "Pray to the Lord for it." (v.7b)*

To pray for a city is to "be on its side." This letter insists that the exiles give up not only their hostility toward Babylon but even a sullen indifference or disdain for it.

- *"God has little use for grudging attitudes. What emerges in the call to them in verses 5-7 is gloriously positive: a liberation from the paralyzing sullenness of inertia and self-pity, into doing, for a start, what comes to hand and makes for growth, but above all what makes for peace."* (Kidner, p.100).
- Jeremiah was contradicting the prophets who were stirring up the people to hate and detest the pagan city. Of course, Jeremiah had said that there will be a judgment on Babylon (cf. 27:7) if the city did not repent. Thus the Israelites did not close their eyes to its wickedness.
- Yet they were to become involved with the city and seek its peace and prosperity. It is bad theology which preaches God's honor in such a way as to make you despise and fear and hate your city.

*A vision for the city – “Seek the peace of the city.” (v.7a)*

This means that we are not simply to seek “church growth” or the prospering of the people of God in the city — we are to seek the prosperity of the city itself.

- God does tell the Jews to “increase, do not decrease” (v.6b), but he moves beyond that in verse 7.
- Believers are not just to seek prosperity and peace in the city, but we are to seek prosperity and peace for the city.
- We are to have a vision for what our city should look like, not just for our own group or church.

### **Specific directions**

#### *1. Settle in the city*

- They are to “settle down” (v.5), and begin to raise families there. “Marry and have sons and daughters” (v.6a). They are to plan for long-term involvement.

#### *2. Grow in the city*

- They are to “increase in number there; do not decrease” (v.6b). This means they are to wax stronger and more numerous. But it also means that they are not to lose their unique identity, but must keep their faith and godly ways.

#### *3. Do your work with thought for the city’s welfare*

- They are to invest in the community both by “building homes” (v.5) and “planting gardens” (v.5).
- When Jeremiah says they are to “also” seek the city’s prosperity (v.7) he means that they are to seek their own prosperity in such a way that benefits the city.
  - a) They are to use their gifts and capital in such a way that lifts the whole city.
  - b) They are not to use the city for their own advancement, but are to seek *its* advancement.
- This, of course, means to be generous with your giving. But it also means to conduct your career and business in a distinctively Christian manner, working with integrity, compassion and justice.

#### 4. *Seek the city's holistic peace*

- Jeremiah tells them to “*seek the shalom of the city*”. This (we have seen) is an unusually rich word, much like the word “blessed.”
- It means far more than superficial happiness or the absence of unrest. It means every kind of harmony and prosperity. That includes at least:
  - a) love and peace between diverse peoples
  - b) love and peace within strong families
  - c) safety and decent physical living conditions for those without them
  - d) spiritual peace for those without God

#### 5. *Pray for the city*

*“Pray to the Lord for it; for if it prospers, you too will prosper.” (v.7)*

- a) This cannot be seen as an “add on,” unrelated to the other directions.
- b) Specific, prevailing prayer for the city will help the other functions be done with intelligence, sensitivity, compassion and willingness.

#### **Contemporary application**

Actually, these general and specific directions can be applied most directly and literally by Christians today. However, for most Christians who have moved to the city, this can be a pretty revolutionary concept. So how can we take practical steps toward this kind of mindset and lifestyle?

1. Concentrate on specific directions 1 and 5.
  - a) If you are not sure you can settle permanently, stay over a longer term, at least, than you originally planned or expected.
  - b) Also, begin a far more specific and consistent prayer ministry for the city.
    - i. Pray for specific neighborhoods, for particular people groups, for specific problems and leaders in the city.
    - ii. Use the Metro section of the Daily *NY Times* (or the City section of the Sunday *Times*) to find lots of great things to pray for (or against!)

2. Look at the three “middle” specific directions — 2, 3 and 4. Commit yourself to doing more in at least one of them than you are now. Ways to do that:

a) “Grow” (2).

- i. Consider how to better share your faith with your colleagues or neighbors in the city.
- ii. Consider becoming an apprentice small group leader and becoming more involved in that ministry.

b) “Do your work” (3).

- i. Become more conscious of how Christian ethics and teaching can shape the way you do your work. How can you be a better witness through your job?

c) “Seek the peace.” (4).

- i. Become involved in some ministry that helps people in need (work for economic peace).
- ii. Don’t develop friendships only with your own race and culture (work for racial peace).

**3. What is the relationship between the peace/wholeness of v.11 and the peace/wholeness of v.7a?**

**These two are identical**

The Jews were to “*seek peace*” (v.7). The NIV translates this single word *shalom* as “*peace and prosperity*” here to show its tremendous richness. The Hebrew word “shalom” is rich and multi-faceted.

- Essentially, it means well being and fulfillment in every aspect of existence — spiritual, psychological, social, physical.
  - a) It cannot be confined to merely “spiritual inner peace” or to merely outward physical and economic comfort.
  - b) It means being right with God, with self, with community, with the natural world.
  - c) This is what the believers are to seek for this unbelieving city!
- Then in v.11, God promises to give his people “shalom” as well — multi-dimensional peace and wholeness. This is the same word and thus the same thing that he directs the exiles to seek and give to the pagan city of Babylon. (The NIV uses the same word “prosper” to show its identity with v.7).

**These two are cause-and effect**

When we put verses 11 and 7 together, we see a dynamic principle at work. The believers will find their own peace and prosperity not in seeking their own peace, but in seeking the peace of their city.

- It is only as the Jews give up their resentment and scorn of Babylon and seek to serve it and prosper it (vv.4-7) that, paradoxically, they will find their own prosperity.
- Verse 7b says it quite directly: *"If [Babylon] prospers, you will prosper."* If they concentrate on bringing peace/wholeness to this pagan city (v.7a), then God will bring them peace/wholeness through this pagan city (v.7b)!

Derek Kidner writes: *"Even the New Testament, with its instruction to overcome evil with good (Rom.12:21) and to 'adorn the doctrine of God by perfect courtesy toward all' (Tit.2:10; 3:2; 1 Pet.2:18) hardly outstrips the boldness of this teaching... To... give something to their captors... was the surest way — and still is — to the givers' own enrichment, as verse 7b points out."* (Kidner, p.100)

- Kidner is right in saying that, here, Jeremiah looks ahead to the New Testament, where Jesus descends to serve those who have rejected him and, through his humbling becomes exalted (Phil.2:1-11).
- He is also right to refer to Romans 12:21ff, where Paul says that when we meet persecution and hostility, we should *"overcome evil with good!"*
- Jeremiah 29 shows us that we must not treat this command individualistically. We are to overcome the evil of our society and of our city not simply by denouncing it or scolding it or withdrawing from it but by doing good deeds of compassion and generosity.

The exact nature of the cause-effect relationship is somewhat mysterious.

- We know that, from one perspective, it is not comfortable and enriching to seek the peace of the city. Surely we could live more cheaply elsewhere and be saving more! And surely it is emotionally draining as well to serve in the city.
- Yet we know that the One who says, "You must lose your life to find it," now promises that we will be enriched and made whole and prosperous if we do not seek our own peace but the peace of the city. And those who have done this will testify that it is true.

Take a moment and make this personal. What is this text saying? This — that through you, he can bring his peace to the city, and through the city, he will bring his peace to you.



## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

“When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices.” – *Proverbs 11:10*

Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world... Christianity revitalized life in... cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective... services.

– Rodney Stark <sup>1</sup>

God in our time is moving climactically through a variety of social, political, and economic factors to bring earth's people into closer contact with one another, into greater interaction and interdependence, and into earshot of the gospel. Through worldwide migration to the city, God may be setting the stage for Christian mission's greatest and perhaps final hour... now that a majority of the world's unreached populations live in cities... To ignore the plight of the urban masses or refuse to grapple with the trials and complexities of city life is worse than merely a strategic error. It is unconscionable disobedience to God, whose providence directs the movements of people and creates missionary opportunity. [Acts 17:27-28: “He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him...”]

– Roger Greenway <sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the best analogy to describe all this is that of a model home. We are God's demonstration community of the rule of Christ in the [unbelieving] city. On a tract of earth's land, purchased with the blood of Christ, Jesus the kingdom developer has begun building new housing. As a sample of what will be, he has erected a model home of what will eventually fill the urban neighborhood. He now invites the... world into that model home to take a look at what will be. The church is the occupant of that model home, inviting

neighbors into its open door to Christ. Evangelism is when the signs are up, saying 'Come in and look around'... As citizens of, not survivalists in, this new city within the old city, we see our ownership as the gift of Jesus the Builder (Luke 17:20-21). As residents, not pilgrims, we await the kingdom coming when the Lord returns from his distant country (Luke 19:12). The land is already his... in this model home we live out our new lifestyle as citizens of the heavenly city that one day will come. We do not abandon our jobs or desert the city that is... We are to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" to which God called us in exile (Jer.29:7).

– Harvie Conn <sup>3</sup>

### Application questions

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?**

**2. How can a church's "prosperity" be the joy of a pagan city, when so many of its residents are not believers?**

Since Redeemer's beginning, our mission has been shaped by Proverbs 11:10 – *"When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices."* Acts 8:8 says the result of Phillip's urban ministry was "great joy in that city." So the goal of city ministry is not just individual conversions and the planting of churches. The goal is — *"Joy in the city,"* and *"The city rejoices."* How might that come about?

1. Proverbs 11:10 says we are to “*prosper*.” The Hebrew word means “to be healthy, to increase, to have things go well.” This is a very comprehensive word. We can understand it to mean “growth” in all its dimensions.<sup>4</sup> This means:

**a) Growth in Spirit**

- i. We are to grow into the character of Christ (Gal. 5:22-24; Eph.4:11-14).
- ii. We are to be “*growing in grace and the knowledge of Jesus Christ*” (II Peter 3:18) and “*overflowing with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*” (Rom.15:13).
- iii. Christians must be filled with the Spirit, both for growth in holiness (Eph. 5:18-22), and for assurance and boldness in witness (Acts 4:23-31; Romans 8:1-5).
- iv. This must happen if we are to “prosper.”

**b) Growth in numbers**

- i. If we reach out in love to those who don’t believe, the church will grow numerically. “*The Lord added [to the church] daily such as were being saved*” (Acts 2:47).
- ii. As individuals grow in Christlikeness, they will grow in Christ’s passion for the lost, and a steady stream of new converts will constantly enter the church.
- iii. This must happen if we are to “prosper.”

**c) Growth in community**

- i. A church must also grow in the maturity of its fellowship and relationships within the Body.
- ii. Through Christ “*the whole body builds itself up in love, as each part does its work*” (Eph.4:16).
- iii. This includes maturity of leadership (James 5:14; I Timothy 3; I Peter 5:1-5), accountability between members (Matt.5:23; Heb. 3:13; 10:24-25; James 5:16), mutual ministry through gifts (I Cor.14:4-12).
- iv. This must happen if we are to “prosper.”

**d) Growth in servanthood**

- i. By loving deeds, the gospel of the kingdom becomes visible. (See below, III.B.1).
- ii. The church must grow and mature in *dikaïoma* (justice, I Thess.2:10; Titus 2:12), in *eleos* (mercy, Luke 10:37; James 2:14-17), and in *diakonia* (service) toward the poor, the broken, the outcasts.
- iii. Diaconal ministry grows as we discern the needs in our area and the gifts Christ has given us for them.
- iv. This must happen if we are to “prosper.”

When Christians are growing in all of these ways, we are “increasing” and “prospering.” So the first thing that Christians must do is to put our own house in order, be spiritually healthy, and grow in grace, both as individuals and as a body.

2. We are told that our prosperity is to be for the benefit of the city.

- a) Paired with verse 10 is Proverbs 11:11 — “Through the blessing of the upright a city is exalted.” The city is exalted (literally “lifted”) because the upright bless the city.
- b) In the Bible, “blessedness” is a state of complete fulfillment and well-being, and “to bless” someone was to will and work for that in them.
- c) Here we are told that believers are to bless, not curse their city. We are to love it, show in our words and our deeds that we want to “lift it up” and promote its welfare in every way. And the city around us should see that spirit and motive in us.
- d) So Proverbs 11:10-11 taken together shows us that urban ministry is much more than just growth in numbers of conversions and churches. Christians are to lift up the welfare of the city and bring it joy because they are living out their lives in the city through love and service.
- e) This means we are to seek much more than “church growth” in the city. We are not just to seek prosperity and peace in the city, but we are to seek prosperity and peace for the city.
- f) **We are to have a vision for what our city should look like, not just for our church.**

g) Christians' prosperity must be for the city's prosperity.

i. This means we not only envision many thousands finding the Christ but that business and the arts would be conducted differently.

ii. It means that social conditions would improve in needy neighborhoods.

Many Christians today are like the Jews who wanted to band together in enclaves outside the city. We do so, as the Jews did, partly out of:

- a) a denial of our true situation
- b) a desire to stay pure
- c) resentment and fear toward the city

But we must take Jeremiah's advice.

- We should admit that we are in exile (James 1:1; I Peter 1:1) and come into the city and become deeply involved in it, where we can do the most good.
- We should grow and prosper, building families, businesses and careers, not losing our identity, but growing in numbers.
- We should live in such a way that our prosperity benefits the city, increasing its prosperity and peace — it's shalom, meaning its total well-being, spiritual, social, and physical.

### 3. Look at Conn's quote. How is the setting of the city conducive to showing the world the nature of the kingdom?

Christians need to make the invisible visible (and they can't without the city).

Jesus was the Word become flesh, the invisible become visible (John 1:14).

- In Jesus' ministry, he continually combined words with deeds; he not only spoke of the kingdom but he demonstrated the kingdom (Luke 24:19).
- The Bible continually tells Christians that they, too, must not only talk the gospel but embody the gospel, making the invisible truth visible.
- When we look at specifically how the Scripture commands us to do so, we see that it is far better to be in a city than to be locked away in homogeneous, socially comfortable suburbs.
- We are to make the invisible visible:

**Through reconciled community**

- In Jesus' famous prayer in John 17, he says that the world will know the gospel is true when it sees it embodied in extraordinary love among his disciples. *"May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me"* (John 17:23).
- But in Acts 2, we see that the mark of the unity of the Spirit is that it breaks down racial and cultural barriers present since the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11).
  - a) When the world sees Christians loving other Christians who are culturally the same, it does not see anything unusual.
  - b) But the world will be amazed if it sees people getting along in Christ who cannot get along anywhere else.
- The gospel relativizes and demotes cultural distinctives as components of identity. The gospel of grace humbles oppressors into repentance and oppressed into forgiveness.
- Richard Lovelace puts it: *"Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free... to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes to do so, as Paul suggests in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, and he is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures."*<sup>5</sup>
- This way to show the world the gospel is far more available in the city.

**Through giving and deeds of mercy**

- There are numerous references in the New Testament to how radical giving and costly sharing of material goods was an amazing demonstration to the world of the reality of the gospel. Acts 4:32 tells us *"All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had."*
- Immediately afterward we read *"With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus."* (v.33) The ministry of giving and mercy embodied the gospel.
- Proof of this was a letter from the Emperor Julian, who tried to revive paganism in the fourth century. Exasperated by the growth of the church, he wrote: *"It is disgraceful that... while the impious Galileans [Christians] support both their own poor and ours as well, all men see that our people lack aid from us!"*
- James says that our faith is dead and invisible without involvement with the poor (James 1:14-16).

**Through cultural production**

- C. S. Lewis was an apologist and evangelist for Christianity. But arguably he did more to demonstrate the truth of the faith through his art than through his argument.
- He wrote some good essays (*Mere Christianity; Miracles*), but his fiction probably did more to spread the faith (*The Chronicles of Narnia; Screwtape Letters; The Great Divorce*; and his Space Trilogy).
- Preaching Christian truth is crucial, but we must also demonstrate the wisdom of it in our work (cf. Daniel 1:1-8) and we must especially embody it through the arts.

**For further study:**

Ray Bakke, *The Urban Christian* (IVP)

1 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Harper, 1996), p.161.

2 Roger Greenway, "World Urbanization and Missiological Education," in *Missiological Education for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Paul Pierson* (Orbis, 1996).

3 Harvie Conn, *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality* (Baker, 1997), p.202.

4 Orlando Costas, "A Holistic Concept of Church Growth," *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert Shenk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 95-107.

5 Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, p.199.









# Gospel Christianity

## What is the Gospel?

### Study 1 | Course 1

The word “gospel” occurs so often in the New Testament that it is clearly a summary term for the basic core of what Christianity is all about. But what is that core?

#### KEY CONCEPT — GOSPEL

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

##### **The gospel is *news* rather than instruction.**

The Greek term “gospel” (*ev-angelion*) distinguished the Christian message from that of other religions.

- An “*ev-angel*” was news of a great historical event that changed the listeners’ condition and required response (such as a victory in war or the ascension of a new king).
- So the gospel is news of what God has done to accomplish salvation through Jesus Christ in history. It is not advice about what we must do to reach God.
- We do not achieve this salvation. We only accept it.

##### **The gospel is *grace* rather than merit.**

The gospel is: “I am accepted through Christ, therefore I obey.” Religion is: “I obey, therefore I am accepted.” So the gospel differs from both religion and irreligion.

- You can seek to be your own “lord and savior” by breaking the law of God. But you can also do so by *keeping* the law in order to earn your salvation.
- Disbelief in the gospel of grace, of course, keeps the unconverted from God. But a lack of deep belief in the gospel is also the main cause of spiritual deadness, fear, and pride in Christians, because our hearts continue to act on the basis of “I obey, therefore I am accepted.”
  - a) Our failure to forgive others is not simply a lack of obedience, but a failure to believe we are saved by grace, too.
  - b) Our lying in order to cover up a mistake is not simply a lack of obedience, but a failure to find our acceptance in God rather than in human approval.
- So we do not “get saved” by believing the gospel and then “grow” by trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. Believing the gospel is not only the way to meet God, but also the way to grow into him.

**The gospel is *reversal* of the weak and the strong.**

Christ wins our salvation through losing, achieves power through weakness and service, comes to wealth via giving all away. And those who receive his salvation are not the strong and accomplished but those who admit they are weak and lost.

- This pattern creates an alternate kingdom or city (Matt.5:14-16) in which there is a complete reversal of the values of the world with regard to power, recognition, status, wealth.
- When we understand that we can be saved by sheer grace through Christ, we stop seeking salvation in these things. The reversal of the cross, the grace of God, thus liberates us from bondage to the power of material things and worldly status.
- This means we no longer disdain those of classes or races that we used to think beneath us.

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?****2. "If you are saved no matter how you live, what incentive is there for living a virtuous, obedient life?" Formulate some answers.****3. "Well, if you know you are always forgiven then what incentive is there for ever repenting?" Formulate some answers.**

## Galatians 2:11-16

- ## Addendum

– John Stott, Galatians p.60

## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

There is a righteousness which Paul calls “the righteousness of faith.” God imputes it to us apart from our works — in other words, it is *passive* righteousness... So then, have we nothing to do to obtain this righteousness? No, *nothing at all!* For this righteousness comes by doing nothing, hearing nothing, knowing nothing, but rather in knowing and believing this only — that Christ has gone to the right hand of the Father, not to become our judge, but to become *for us* our wisdom, our righteousness, our holiness, our salvation! Now God sees no sin in us, for in this heavenly righteousness sin has no place. So now we may certainly think, “Although I still sin, I don’t despair, because Christ lives, who is both my righteousness and my eternal life.” In that righteousness I have no sin, no fear, no guilty conscience, no fear of death. I am indeed a sinner in this life of mine and in my own righteousness, but I have another life, another righteousness above this life, which is in Christ, the Son of God.

Christians never completely understand [this] themselves, and thus do not take advantage of it when they are troubled and tempted. So we have to constantly teach it, repeat it, and work it out in practice. Anyone who does not understand this righteousness or cherish it in the heart and conscience will continually be buffeted by fears and depression. *Nothing gives peace like this passive righteousness.* The troubled conscience has no cure for its desperation and feeling of unworthiness unless it takes hold of the forgiveness of sins by *grace*, offered free of charge in Jesus Christ, which is this passive or Christian righteousness... Once you are in Christ, the Law is the greatest guide for your life, but until you have Christian righteousness, all the law can do is to show you how sinful and condemned you are. But if we first receive Christian righteousness, then we can use the law, not for our salvation, but for his honor and glory, and to lovingly show our gratitude.

– Martin Luther <sup>1</sup>

Only a fraction of the present body of professing Christians are solidly appropriating the justifying work of Christ in their lives... Many... have a theoretical commitment to this doctrine, but in their day-to-day existence they rely on their sanctification for their justification... drawing their assurance of acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience. Few know enough to start each day with a thoroughgoing stand upon Luther’s platform: *you are accepted*, looking outward in faith and claiming the wholly alien righteousness of Christ as the only ground for acceptance, relaxing in that quality of trust which will produce increasing

sanctification as faith is active in love and gratitude... Much that we have interpreted as a defect of sanctification in church people is really an outgrowth of their loss of bearing with respect to justification. Christians who are no longer sure that God loves and accepts them in Jesus, apart from their present spiritual achievements, are subconsciously radically insecure persons... Their insecurity shows itself in pride, a fierce, defensive assertion of their own righteousness, and defensive criticism of others. They come naturally to hate other cultural styles and other races in order to bolster their own security and discharge their suppressed anger.

– Richard Lovelace<sup>2</sup>

### Application questions

1. Which statements impressed you and why?
2. What does it mean to reverse sanctification and justification? What are some ways we do this in our personal lives?
3. The gospel is neither religion nor irreligion, since both are just different strategies of self-salvation. Choose one or two issues and think out a gospel approach that is neither religious nor irreligious.

**Suggested further study**

Richard Lovelace - *Renewal as a Way of Life* (IVP, 1985)

<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther "Preface" in *Commentary on Paul's Epistle to the Galatians* (James Clarke, 1953 edition)

<sup>2</sup> Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (IVP, 1979)



# Gospel Christianity

## Who is God?

### Study 2 | Course 1

There is no more fundamental question than “*Who is God?*” In the Bible, God reveals so many things about himself! Where do we begin? We begin with the *glory* of God.

#### KEY CONCEPT — GLORY

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

The first place in the Bible we hear of God’s “glory” is in Exodus.

- When he first reveals himself to Israel, his immediate presence is characterized by overwhelming brilliance, a shining cloud that appeared to be white-hot fire.
- This first appeared in the desert and on Sinai’s peak (Exodus 16:10; 24:16-17) but eventually settled into the tabernacle itself (Exodus 40:33-35; Psalm 26:8).
- Yet it is evident that God’s glory is not only a literal light, since the Bible says all of the natural creation is full of light (Psalm 19:1; Numbers 14:21).

The importance of God’s glory is seen in the following outline:

- God made the created world for his glory (Psalm 19:1ff).
- God will heal the broken world with his glory (Isaiah 35:2).
- God made us for his glory (Isaiah 43:7).
- God saved us to praise his glory (Ephesians 1:12).
- God does everything for his own glory.
- When he judges, he does so for his own glory (Exodus 14:4).
- When he shows mercy, he does so for his own glory (Isaiah 48:11).

We must do everything we do for his glory (1 Corinthians 10:31)

“God... is infinitely the greatest and best of beings. All things else, with regard to worthiness, importance, and excellence, are perfectly as nothing in comparison to him... The ultimate [goal] of God’s works is... *the glory of God.*”

– Jonathan Edwards

"The Biblical word 'glory' is (Heb) *kavod* [which] means heavy, weighty, significant... The 'glory of the Lord' indicates the brilliance that is connected with all God's virtues and his self-revelation in nature and grace... As an object of loving adoration it is called his [*beauty*]. As an object of our reverent submission it is called his *majesty*. As an object of our joyous gratitude it is called his [*worthiness*]."

– Herman Bavinck

"God's goal [in all he does] is his glory, but this is easily misunderstood. The glory that is his goal is a two-sided, two-stage relationship. It is a conjunction of a) revelatory acts on his part whereby he shows us his glory, with b) responsive adoration in which we give him glory for what we have seen and received. In this conjunction is realized the fellowship of love for which [we] were made."

– J.I. Packer

"The Father... Son... and Holy Spirit glorify each other... Self-giving love is the dynamic currency of the Trinitarian life of God. The persons within God exalt, commune with, and defer to one other... Each harbors the others at the center of his being. In constant movement of overture and acceptance each person envelopes and encircles the others. [So] Creation is neither a necessity nor an accident. Instead, given God's interior life that overflows with regard for others, we might say creation is an act that was *fitting* for God... In creation God graciously made room in the universe for other kinds of beings. God's splendor [glory] becomes clearer whenever the Son of God powerfully spends himself in order to cause others to flourish... Jesus Christ's pattern of life in the world reproduces the inner life of God."

– Cornelius Plantinga

**1. What statements in the section above impressed you and why?**

**2. According to Edwards and Bavinck, how does “glory” relate to the other attributes of God (such as his power, love, wisdom, mercy, righteousness)?**

**3. Why, as Packer says, is it easy to misunderstand the statement that “God seeks his own glory” in all his deeds and creatures?**

## BIBLE STUDY #1

1 Chronicles 16:23-36; Psalm 104:24-34

**What do you learn here about what it means to glorify, to give glory to God, or to treat God as glorious?**

## John 17:1-26

- 1. Verses 1-5, 20-24. a) What is the main thing the Father and the Son do with and for one another? b) What is the reason that they do it? c) What are the things Jesus wants for his followers?**
- 2. Why was the Son willing to lose his glory and come to earth? (See vv.1, 4, 22, 24).**
- 3. What (by implication) is the reason God created us? (See v.24)**

## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

What we have, then, is a picture of God whose love, even before the creation of anything, is other-oriented. This cannot be said (for instance) of Allah... There has always been an other-orientation in the very nature of God... We are the friends of God by virtue of the intra-Trinitarian love of God that so worked out in the fullness of time that the plan of redemption, conceived in the mind of God in eternity past, has exploded into our space-time history at exactly the right moment.

– D. A. Carson <sup>1</sup>

For as God is infinitely the greatest Being, so he is... infinitely the most beautiful and excellent. All the beauty to be found throughout the whole creation is but a reflection of the diffused beams of that Being who hath an infinite fullness of brightness and glory. God is the foundation of all being and all beauty.

– Jonathan Edwards <sup>2</sup>

When I first began to draw near to belief in God and even for some time after, I found a stumbling block in the demand that we should “praise” God; still more in the suggestion that God Himself demanded it. We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue... but the most obvious fact about praise — whether of God or anything, strangely escaped me. I never noticed that all enjoyment spontaneously overflows into praise. The world rings with praise — lovers praising their mistresses, readers their favorite poet, walkers praising the countryside, players praising their favorite game... Except where intolerably adverse circumstances interfere, praise almost seems to be inner health made audible...

Men spontaneously praise whatever they value, so they spontaneously urge us to join them in praising it: “Wasn’t it glorious? Don’t you think that magnificent?” Indeed we can’t help doing it...because praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment; it is its appointed consummation... Our expressions of praise are inadequate — but how if one could really and fully praise things to perfection — then indeed our delight would attain perfect development! To understand what [heaven] means we must imagine ourselves in perfect love with God — drunk with, drowned in, dissolved by, that delight which, far from remaining pent up within ourselves... flows out from us incessantly again in effortless and perfect expression — our joy no more separable from the praise in which it liberates and utters itself than the brightness a mirror receives is separable from the brightness it sheds. The Scots catechism says a man’s chief end is to glorify God and enjoy him forever. But then we will know these are the same thing. To fully enjoy is to glorify — in commanding us to glorify Him, God is inviting us to enjoy him.

– C.S. Lewis <sup>3</sup>

We are all starved for the glory of God, not self. No one goes to the Grand Canyon to increase self-esteem. Why do we go? Because there is greater healing for the soul in beholding splendor than there is in beholding self... The point is this: We were made to know and treasure the glory of God above all things; and when we trade that treasure for images, everything is disordered. The sun of God's glory was made to shine at the center of the solar system of our soul. And when it does, all the planets of our life are held in their proper orbit. But when the sun is displaced, everything flies apart. The healing of the soul begins by restoring the glory of God to its flaming, all-attracting place at the center.

– John Piper <sup>4</sup>

### Summary

The universe was literally an explosion of God's glory — created to reflect and communicate his glory and beauty to us — so that, as we increasingly come to adore and enjoy his glory in all things and especially in his Son, Jesus Christ, we may increasingly share in God's own happiness and delight.

### Application questions

- 1. We said that it is natural that God's call to glorify him is subject to misunderstanding. It sounds like he needs it and that he is egotistical. Write your own answer to this misunderstanding based on what you've learned.**
- 2. God created the world and us so we could share in the love, joy and glory of the intra-personal Trinity. There are innumerable practical implications and applications to this! We will tease some out in the coming weeks. But for now, think out some of them yourselves.**

**a) What mistaken thoughts, distorted emotions or wrong practices result when I don't focus enough on God's gloriousness?**

**b) What mistaken thoughts, distorted emotions or wrong practices result when I forget the reason God created the world and us?**

**Suggested further study**

J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (IVP, 1973)

<sup>1</sup> D.A. Carson, *The Difficult Doctrine of the Love of God* (IVP/UK, 2000), p.44-45)

<sup>2</sup> Edwards, "The Nature of True Virtue", in *Works: Ethical Writings* (vol. 8), p. 550-551.

<sup>3</sup> C.S.Lewis, "A Word About Praising", in *Reflections on the Psalms* (Harcourt and Brace, 1958), pp.93-97.

<sup>4</sup> John Piper, *Seeing and Savoring Jesus Christ* (Crossway, 2001), p. 21.

<sup>5</sup> This paragraph is heavily based on a lecture by George Marsden: "True Virtue and the Context of Creation."





# Gospel Christianity

## What is wrong with us?

### Study 3 | Course 1

Most agree something is wrong with the human race and society, that things are not as they ought to be. The Bible's explanation for what's wrong with the world is *sin*.

### KEY CONCEPT – SIN

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

The most common-sense definition of sin is disobedience to God. But the Biblical view shows this has several dimensions. Here are three basic words for sin in the OT:

**1. Avah** – often translated “*iniquity*” (Ps 51:2a) means to be twisted out of shape.

- Just as when a bone is dislocated from its socket it causes great pain and damage, so a heart not centered on God is filled with deeply distorted beliefs (self-views, God-views, world-views), and drives (inordinate, enslaving and misplaced desires.)
- *“At one time we too were foolish, disobedient, deceived, and enslaved by all kinds of passions and pleasures... hated and hating.”* (Titus 3:3)

**2. Chatha** – often translated “*sin*” (Ps 51:2b) means to miss the mark or target.

- Sin is the failure to live as God wants — in peaceful harmony with him, others, and the world. Thus “omissions” (against God’s call to love and contentment) are as wrong as “commissions” (against God’s prohibition of lying, stealing, etc.)
- *“All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God.”* (Rom 3:23)
- This is the mark that is missed. We fail to live for God’s glory and instead live for our own.

**3. Pasha** - often translated “*transgression*” (Ps 51:1) means to willfully rebel against someone to whom you owe allegiance. (See Isa 1:2)

- Despite being self-deceived and enslaved (cf. “*avah*”) we are still responsible for our actions.
- Our disobedience to God is a deliberate substitution of our will for his.

- *"For though they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks... they exchanged the glory of the immortal God and worshipped and served created things rather than the Creator." (Rom 1:21a, 23a, 25b)*

**Summary**

- We sin when we refuse to live for God's glory and instead seek our own glory (importance, significance) in other things.
- Sin is the misery of making anything in your life more important to your hope, identity, meaning, or joy than God.

What is... sin's essence? *Playing God*... acting as if you, and your pleasure, were the end to which all things, God included, must be made to function as a means.

– J.I. Packer <sup>1</sup>

Faith is: that the self... is grounded... in God. Sin is faith's opposite... Sin is... *wanting to be one's own self, instead of a self whose specifications and identity are the outcome of one's relationship to God.*

– Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* <sup>2</sup>

Neither the language of medicine nor of law is adequate substitute for the language of [sin.] Contrary to the medical model, we are not entirely at the mercy of our maladies ...the choice is to enter into the process of repentance... Contrary to the legal model... the essence of sin is not the violation of laws but... a wrecked relationship with God, one another, and the whole created order. "All sins are attempts to fill voids," wrote Simone Weil. Because we cannot stand the God-shaped hole inside of us, we try stuffing it full of all sorts of things, but... only God may fill (it).

– Barbara Brown Taylor <sup>3</sup>

**1. What statements impressed you and why?**

**2. Look at each of the three Hebrew words for sin. What practical mistakes can we make in our thinking about sin if forget or omit any of them.**

**3. Barbara Brown Taylor says that, "The essence of sin is not the violation of laws... but a wrecked relationship." Do you think this is true? Why or why not?**

## BIBLE STUDY #1

Psalm 51:1-5

**What things does David admit here? How does each one contribute to a full understanding of sin?**

## BIBLE STUDY #2

Genesis 3:6-24

**1. What does this passage tell us about all the wrecked relationships sin causes?**

**2. What hope does the passage suggest?**

## READINGS

Read & mark: "?"-Question raised; "!"- Insight helpful

The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*. In the Bible, shalom means *universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight* — a rich state of affairs... Human communities would present their racial and regional specialties to other communities in the name of God, in glad recognition that God, too, is a radiant and hospitable community of three persons. In turn, each human being would reflect and color the light of God's presence out of the inimitable resources of his or her own character and essence. Shalom, in other words, is the way things ought to be... We may safely describe evil as any spoiling of shalom, whether physically, morally, spiritually, or otherwise. Sin is the disruption or disturbance of what God has designed... Sin tends to disintegrate both its victims and its perpetrators.

– Cornelius Plantinga <sup>4</sup>

Sin sets up strains in the structure of life which only end in breakdown.

– Derek Kidner <sup>5</sup>

There is no fault which we are more unconscious of ourselves. And the more we have it, the more we dislike it in others. I am talking of Pride or Self-conceit... It is because I want to be the big noise at the party that I am annoyed that someone else is being the big noise... Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind. What you want to get clear is that Pride is *essentially* competitive while the other vices are competitive only, so to speak, by accident. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the next man. We say that people are proud of being rich, or clever, or good-looking, but they are not. They are proud of being richer, or cleverer, or better looking than others... The sexual impulse may drive two men into competition for the same girl. But a proud man will take your girl from you not because he wants her, but just to prove to himself that he is a better man than you.

Nearly all those evils in the world which people put down to greed or selfishness are really far more the result of Pride... It is far more subtle and deadly. Pride can often be used to beat down the simpler vices. Teachers, in fact, often appeal to a boy's pride, or as they call it, self-respect, to make him behave decently. Many have overcome cowardice, or lust, or ill-temper by learning to think that they are beneath their dignity. The devil laughs. He is perfectly content to see you becoming chaste and brave and self-controlled provided he is setting up in you the Dictatorship of Pride — just as he would be quite content to see [the corns on your foot] cured if he was allowed, in return, to give you cancer. For Pride is spiritual cancer: it eats up the very possibility of love, or contentment, or common sense.

In God you come up against something which is in every respect immeasurably superior to yourself. Unless you know God as that — and, therefore, know yourself as nothing in comparison — you do not know God at all. He wants you to be delightedly humble, feeling the infinite relief of having for once got rid of all the silly nonsense about your own dignity which has made you unhappy and restless all your life. Whenever we find that our religious life is making us feel we are good — above all, that we are better than someone else — I think we may be sure that we are being acted on not by God but by the devil... If you think you are not conceited, it means you are very conceited indeed.

– C.S.Lewis <sup>6</sup>

1. Give 4-5 examples of the natural consequences of sin that Kidner and Plantinga talk about.

2. Why is it so important to understand the nature of spiritual pride?
3. Lewis provides a number of tests that can help you detect the presence, location, or even the level of pride in your life. What are they?
4. What mistaken thoughts, distorted emotions or wrong practices result when I don't have a Biblical view of sin?

**Suggested further study**

Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1995)

<sup>1</sup> J.I.Packer, "Sin" in *God's Words* (IVP, 1981) p.73.

<sup>2</sup> This is taken from Kierkegaard's own words and from the summary of his teaching in the introduction the Penguin Classic. Soren Kierkegaard, *The Sickness Unto Death* (Penguin, 1989). Translation and Introduction by Alastair Hannay, pp.11, 114.

<sup>3</sup> Barbara B. Taylor, *Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation* (Cowley, 2000) pp. 57-67.

<sup>4</sup> Cornelius Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be: A Breviary of Sin* (Eerdmans, 1995) pp. 10, 12, 14, 16, 47.

<sup>5</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Proverbs: An Introduction and Commentary* (IVP, 1964), p. 84.

<sup>6</sup> C.S. Lewis, "The Great Sin" in *Mere Christianity* (MacMillan, 1958) pp.94-99.





# Gospel Christianity

## Who is Jesus?

### Study 4 | Course 1

Jesus of Nazareth is the single most influential figure in world history. But who is he?

### KEY CONCEPT – INCARNATION

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

“In the beginning was the Word (Greek: Logos) and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made... And the Word became flesh, and made his dwelling among us, and we beheld his glory.” (John 1:1-3, 14)

The [Greeks] understood *logos* to be the rational principle by which everything exists, and which is the essence of the rational human soul. As far as they were concerned, there is no god other than *logos*, and all that exists has sprung from the seminal *logoi*, seeds of this *logos*... But there is Old Testament background to the term *logos*. It could be argued that John is referring to the *Torah* (roughly, the law, truth, or teaching of God.) Thus *logos* would be rich in meaning for Jewish readers, and yet it would resonate in the minds of readers with entirely pagan backgrounds. But whatever they had understood the term to mean, [John] was forcing them into fresh thought.

At this point [John 1:14] the incarnation, the ‘in-fleshing’ of the [uncreated Word, Jesus] is articulated in the boldest way. If the Evangelist had said only that the eternal word ‘assumed manhood’ or ‘adopted the form of a body,’ the reader steeped in the popular dualism of the Hellenistic world might have missed the point. But John is unambiguous, almost shocking in the expressions he uses: *the Word became flesh*...

This is the supreme revelation. If we are to know God, neither rationalism nor mysticism will suffice. Even the revelation of antecedent Scripture cannot match this revelation, as the Hebrews affirms: *“In the past God spoke... through the prophets... but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son.”* (Heb.1:1-2) The Word, God’s very Self-expression, who was both with God and was God, became flesh: he donned our humanity, save only our sin. God chose to make himself known, finally and ultimately, in a real, historical man.

– D.A.Carson <sup>1</sup>

To the Greeks the “*logos*” was the purpose or meaning of existence. To the Jews the “*logos*” was God’s Word — the truth or moral absolutes at the foundation of all reality. In the beginning of his gospel John addresses both

– Charles Williams <sup>2</sup>

1. What statements impressed you and why?
2. John challenges both the pagan and the Jewish world views with the doctrine of the incarnation. How does the incarnation challenge today's reigning world-views?
3. How does the incarnation shed light on claims that Jesus is the only mediator, the only way, to reach God? (cf. John 14:6; 1 Timothy 2:5)

## BIBLE STUDY #1

Matt 9:2-3; 11:27; 28:18-20; John 5: 21-23; 8:52-59; 20:28-29

**How do these words and deeds of Jesus tell us about his own self-identity and in what ways?**

Matt 9:2-3

Matt 11:27

Matt 28:20

notes	WHO IS JESUS?
	<p data-bbox="500 331 662 367"><u>John 5:21-23</u></p> <p data-bbox="500 699 662 735"><u>John 8:52-59</u></p> <p data-bbox="500 1066 678 1102"><u>John 20:28-29</u></p>

## BIBLE STUDY #2

Mark 1:2-4 (cf. Is 40:3-5); Acts 20:28; Colossians 2:9-10; Hebrews 1:1-3

**How do these claims of Jesus' followers tell us who they believed him to be?**

Mark 1:2-3 (Is 40:3-5)

Acts 20:28

Colossians 2:9-10

Hebrews 1:1-3

## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

The incarnation means that for whatever reason God chose to let us fall into a condition of being limited, to suffer, to be subject to sorrows and death — he has nonetheless had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine... He himself has gone through the whole of human experience — from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death... He was born in poverty and... suffered infinite pain — all for us — and thought it well worth his while.

– D. Sayers <sup>3</sup>

[The Incarnation] meant a laying aside of glory; a voluntary restraint of power; an acceptance of hardship, isolation, ill-treatment, malice and misunderstanding; finally, a death... The “Christmas spirit”...should mean the reproducing in human lives of the temper of him who for our sakes became poor...[It] does not shine out in the... snob who leaves the sub-middle-class sections of the community to get on by themselves. The Christmas spirit is [rather] that of those who, like their Master, live their whole lives on the principle of making themselves poor — spending and being spent — to do good to others — and not just their own friends.

– J.I. Packer <sup>4</sup>

He claims to forgive sins. He says He has always existed. He says He is coming to judge the world at the end of time. Now let us get this clear. Among Pantheists, like the Indians, anyone might say that he was part of God, or one with God: there would be nothing very odd about it. But this man, since He was a Jew, could not mean that kind of God. God, in their language, meant the Being outside the world Who had made it and was infinitely different from anything else. And when you have grasped that, you will see that what this man said was, quite simply, the most shocking thing that has ever been uttered by human lips... I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him

Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to... Jesus was never regarded as a mere moral teacher. He did not produce that effect on any of the people who actually met Him. He produced three effects — Hatred, Terror, and Adoration. There was no trace of people expressing mild approval.

– C.S. Lewis <sup>5</sup>

He says in the clearest voice we have the sentence that mankind craves... *the Maker of all things loves and wants me...* In no other book our culture owns can we see a clearer graph of that need, that tall enormous radiant arc — fragile creatures made by God's hand, hurled into space, then caught at last by a man in some ways like ourselves.

– Reynolds Price <sup>6</sup>

#### **Application questions**

- 1. What practical difference does it make to you that your Savior is not only human but God?**
- 2. What practical difference does it make to you that your Savior is not only God but man?**

**Suggested further study**

Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995)<sup>7</sup>

1 D.A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Eerdmans, 1999), p.126-127.

2 Quoted in Phillip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995), p. 258.

3 Dorothy Sayers, "The Greatest Drama Ever Staged" in *Creed or Chaos?* (Harcourt, Brace and Co. 1949.)

4 J.I. Packer, "God Incarnate" in *Knowing God* (IVP, 1972.)

5 C.S. Lewis, "The Shocking Alternative" in *Mere Christianity* (Macmillan, 1952.)

6 Quoted in Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew* (Zondervan, 1995), p.269.

7 Yancey's book does not put much stress on the deity of Jesus until the last chapter, because his concern is to depict the real flesh-and-blood Jesus of the New Testament texts. But if Yancey is read along with Packer's *Knowing God* and Stott's *The Cross* the student will get a good balanced picture.



# Gospel Christianity

## Why did Jesus die?

### Study 5 | Course 1

Many people who believe in God, sin and the deity of Christ nonetheless get stuck over the question: "But why did Jesus have to die? Why couldn't God just forgive us?"

### KEY CONCEPT – CROSS

Read & mark: "?" – Question raised; "!" – Insight helpful

"*At-one-ment*" means removing barriers to create a new relationship. The Bible reveals what this means by showing us five aspects of the cross.

#### **Sacrifice**

- Sin is impurity, a defilement that makes us unfit for community. This creates shame and a sense of being unacceptable.
- But on the cross Jesus was shamed and excluded (Matt 27:46; Heb 13:11-13) so that we could be purified and cleansed from sin (Heb 1:3, 9:13-14).
- So the cross removes the shame-barrier.

#### **Debt**

- Sin is an obligation (cf. Matt 6:12). When we cannot pay our debts this entails slavery (in ancient cultures) or bankruptcy (today).
- But on the cross Jesus paid a ransom (Mark 10:45) so that we could be redeemed out of bondage (1 Tim 2:6; 1 Cor 6:20).
- So the cross removes the debt-barrier.

#### **Battle**

- Sin is an evil force of self-centeredness and power-accrual that works in the world and in our hearts.
- But on the cross Jesus unmask and disarms evil powers (Col.1:12-14, 2:14-15; Jn 12:31-33) by a complete reversal, through self-sacrifice and service (1 Cor 1:18-31).
- So the cross removes the power of evil over us.

**Relationship**

- Sin is a broken relationship, refusing God his rightful centrality in our hearts. God is alienated from us and us from him (Rom 5:10).
- But on the cross Jesus removes God's anger from us (Heb 9:5; Eph 2:3-5; 1 Jn 2:1-2) and turns our hearts to him as Mediator and Advocate.
- So the cross removes the hostility-barrier.

**Law**

- Sin is a violation of God's righteous character and law. This creates guilt.
- But on the cross Jesus stood in our legal place (Is 53:11, 12; cf. Lk 22:37) took the judgment we deserved (1 Pet 3:18; Rom 3:21-26; Gal 3:13) so we can get the treatment he deserved (2 Cor 5:21).
- So the cross removes the guilt-barrier.
- Some metaphors have more to do with the objective satisfaction of something within God that opens the way for our acceptance.
- Some have more to do with the subjective revelation of God's character to us that changes the way we live.
- No one metaphor alone conveys the richness of all that the cross achieved.
- But running through all of them is a single theme-the self-substitution of God.
  - a) God himself supplies what we should have provided.
  - b) He is excluded, bankrupted, taken prisoner and defeated.
  - c) He receives God's wrath and judgment-in our stead-so we can be accepted and liberated.

"The righteous, loving Father humbled himself to become in and through his only Son's flesh, sin and a curse for us, in order to redeem us without compromising his own character. The biblical gospel of atonement is of God satisfying himself by substituting himself for us... The concept of substitution may be said, then, to lie at the heart of both sin and salvation. For the essence of sin is man substituting himself for God, while the essence of salvation is God substituting himself for man. Man asserts himself against God and puts himself where only God deserves to be; God sacrifices himself for man and puts himself where only man deserves to be. Man claims prerogatives which belong to God alone; God accepts penalties which belong to man alone."

– John Stott <sup>1</sup>

- notes*

## Romans 3:21-26

3. vv.25-26 How can Jesus' "atoning sacrifice" make God both "just" AND "the one who justifies" those who believe?

## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

The narrative context of [Jesus’ teaching on the cross in Mark 10:45] features a bid for recognition and honor, in the form of requests for the two primary seats of honor... Rome was unified not only by one emperor but also by a political order based on the ethics of patronage... Clients were bound to their patrons and often had clients of their own... with everyone ultimately indebted to the emperor, who had a client status with the gods themselves... Against such a world order, Jesus insisted that status must be measured [not by who owed you but] by one’s role as a servant... and that service was to be given to those of lower status... Jesus opposed the Roman order at the most fundamental level, substituting for the pervasive worldview... a way of being in the world that took as its starting point the [grace] of God...

– J. Green and M. Baker <sup>4</sup>

Forgiveness flounders because I exclude the enemy from the community of humans even as I exclude myself from the community of sinners. But no one can be in the presence of the God of the crucified Messiah for long without overcoming this double exclusion — without transposing the enemy from the sphere of the monstrous... into the sphere of shared humanity and herself from the sphere of proud innocence into the sphere of common sinfulness. When one knows [as the cross demonstrates] that the torturer will not eternally triumph over the victim, one is free to rediscover that person’s humanity and imitate God’s love for him. And when one knows [as the cross demonstrates] that God’s love is greater than all sin, one is free to see oneself in the light of God’s justice and so rediscover one’s own sinfulness.

– Miroslav Wolf <sup>5</sup>

The heavens frighten us; they are too calm;  
In all the universe we have no place.

Our wounds are hurting us; where is the balm?  
Lord Jesus, by thy scars we know thy grace.

The other gods were strong; but thou wast weak;  
They rode, but thou didst stumble to a throne;

But to our wounds only God’s wounds can speak,  
And not a god has wounds, but thou alone.

– Edward Shillito <sup>6</sup>

He was without any comforts of God — no feeling that God loved him — no feeling that God pitied him — no feeling that God supported him. God was his sun before — now that sun became all darkness... He was without God — he was as if he had no God. All that God had been to him before was taken from

him now. He was Godless — deprived of his God. He had the feeling of the condemned, when the Judge says: "Depart from me, ye cursed," "who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power." He felt that God said the same to him. Ah! This is the hell which Christ suffered. The ocean of Christ's sufferings is unfathomable... He was forsaken in the [place] of sinners. If you close with him as your surety, you will never be forsaken... "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" [The answer?] For me — for me.

– Robert M. M'Cheyne <sup>7</sup>

God has chosen to save the world through the cross, through the shameful and powerless death of the crucified Messiah. If that shocking event is the revelation of the deepest truth about the character of God, then our whole way of seeing the world is turned upside down... all values are transformed... God refuses to play games of power and prestige on human terms.

– Richard Hays <sup>8</sup>

**1. What are some of the practical implications of the cross that each of the readings highlights?**

### Suggested further study

8 Richard Hays, *First Corinthians* (Abingdon, 1997), p.27, 31, 36.





# Gospel Christianity

## How do we change?

### Study 6 | Course 1

Christians do not grow simply by trying hard to live according to Biblical principles. What then is the key to how we change into Christ-likeness?

#### KEY CONCEPT – IDOLATRY

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

Idolatry is a major theme in the Bible for what ails us — psychologically, intellectually, sociologically and culturally.

##### The inevitability of idolatry

- The very first commandment is *“I am your God — have no other gods before me.”* There is no third option between those two.
- Rom 1:25 says we will *“worship and serve”* either God or some created thing (an idol). It is not possible that we should worship nothing.
- Something will capture our hearts and imaginations and be the most important thing, the ultimate concern, value and allegiance.
- So every personality, community, and thought-form will be based on either God Himself or on some god-substitute, an idol.

##### The range of idolatry

- So an idol is anything more fundamental than God to your happiness, meaning in life, and identity.
- Idolatry is the inordinate desire of (even) something good.
  - a) This means any *thing* can become an idol, including good things such as:
    - i. career
    - ii. family
    - iii. achievement
    - iv. your independence
    - v. a political cause
    - vi. material possessions
    - vii. certain people in dependence on you
    - viii. power and influence
    - ix. physical attractiveness
    - x. romance
    - xi. human approval
    - xii. financial security
    - xiii. your place in a particular social circle or institution

- Idols are not only personal and individual; they are also corporate and cultural.
- a) Different societies can make into ultimate values things like:
  - i. the family ("traditional values")
  - ii. feeling (romanticism)
  - iii. the state (communism)
  - iv. racial superiority (fascism)
  - v. rationality (empiricism)
  - vi. individual will and experience (existentialism)
  - vii. group identity (post-modernism)

#### **The power of idolatry**

- On the one hand, an idol is an empty "nothing" with no real power to help us and save us (Is 40:20; 41:6,7). It is only a way we try to save ourselves (Is 44:10-13).
- On the other hand, paradoxically, our idols exercise great power and control over us. They enslave (Jer 2:25).
  - a) Once we have come to believe that something will really make us happy, then we cannot help ourselves — we must follow our god.
  - b) Idols demand complete dependence (Is.44:17); they completely capture our hearts (Ezek 14:1-5).
- In Romans 1 Paul shows how all the breakdowns in life — spiritual, psychological, social, cultural — come because we "worship created things rather than the creator." (Rom 1:25)

#### **The importance of understanding idolatry**

- The Bible does not consider idolatry to be one sin among many (and thus now a rare sin only among primitive people).
- Rather, idolatry is always the reason we ever do anything wrong.
- Why do we ever fail to love or keep promises or live unselfishly? Of course, the general answer is "because we are weak and sinful."
- The specific answer is always that there is something besides Jesus Christ that you feel you must have to be happy, that is more important to your heart than God, and that is enslaving the heart through inordinate desires.
  - a) For example, we would not lie unless first we had made something — human approval, "face," reputation, power over others, financial advantage — more important and valuable to our hearts than the grace of God.

- So the secret to change is to identify and dismantle the basic idols of the heart.

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?**

**2. What are some examples of personal idols? What are some examples of social-cultural idols? Discuss how idols are at the root of so many problems.**

## Romans 1:18-25

- 3. V. 24-25 – What are some of the results of idolatry in our lives?**

## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

“All those who do not at all times... trust in His favor, grace and good-will, but seek His favor in other things or in themselves, do not keep this [First] Commandment, and practice real idolatry, even if they were to do the works of all the other Commands... For the chief work is not present, without which all the others are nothing but mere sham, show and pretense, with nothing back of them... If we doubt or do not believe that God is gracious to us and is pleased with us, or if we presumptuously expect to please Him only through and after our works, then it is all pure deception, outwardly honoring God, but inwardly setting up self as a false [savior]...”

– Martin Luther <sup>1</sup>

We all automatically gravitate toward the assumption that we are justified by our level of sanctification, and when this posture is adopted, it inevitably focuses our attention not on Christ but on the adequacy of our own obedience. We start each day with our personal security not resting on the accepting love of God and the sacrifice of Christ but on our present feelings or recent achievements in the Christian’s life. Since these arguments will not quiet the human conscience, we are inevitably moved either to discouragement and apathy or to a self-righteousness [some form of idolatry] which falsifies the record to achieve a sense of peace...

– Richard Lovelace <sup>2</sup>

“‘Lust,’ **epithumiai** [inordinate desires], used in Gal.5:16ff; Eph.2:3, 4:22; I Pet.2:11, 4:2; I John 2:16; James 1:14ff, is the catch-all for what is wrong with us. The NT merges the concept of idolatry and the concept of inordinate, life-ruling desires... for lust, demandingness, craving and yearning are specifically termed ‘idolatry’ (Eph.5:5 and Colossians 3:5).

– David Powlison <sup>3</sup>

When a finite value has been elevated to centrality and imagined as a final source of meaning, then one has chosen... a god... One has a “god” when a finite value is... viewed as that without which one cannot receive life joyfully.

**Anxiety** becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values... Suppose my god is sex or my physical health or the Democratic Party. If I experience any of these under genuine threat, then I feel myself shaken to the depths. **Guilt** becomes neurotically intensified to the degree that I have idolized finite values... Suppose I value my ability to teach and

communicate clearly... then if I [fail in teaching well] I am stricken with neurotic guilt. **Bitterness** becomes neurotically intensified when someone or something stands between me and something that is my ultimate value.] To the extent to which limited values are exalted to idolatries... [when any of those values are lost], **boredom** becomes pathological and compulsive... My subjectively experienced boredom may then become infinitely projected toward the whole cosmos... This picture of the self is called despair [The milder forms are disappointment, disillusionment, cynicism.]”

– T.C. Oden <sup>4</sup>

Your religion is what you do with your solitude.

– Archbishop William Temple

#### Application questions

1. **How, according to Luther, does failing to believe in justification by grace alone break the first commandment? What is the implication for how we really change our hearts and lives?**
2. **What help do the Powlison and Oden quotes give us for identifying our own idols?**

3. What help does the quote by William Temple provide us for identifying the idols of the heart?

4. Imagine a Christian person who says: "I have become very depressed since I lost my job. I feel like a failure."

- Friend A says: "Your whole problem is a lack of faith! Christians shouldn't be depressed! You should repent and be more thankful."
- Friend B says: "Your whole problem is that you don't see how much God loves you! You need to think about your value to him."

On the basis of what you have learned, determine what is inadequate about both approaches — and suggest a better approach.

### Suggested further study

David Powlison, *"Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair"*

1 Martin Luther, *Treatise Concerning Good Works* (1520) (Part X. XI)

2 *Dynamics of Spiritual Life*

3 David Powlison, *Idols of the Heart and Vanity Fair*

4 *Two Worlds: Notes on the Death of Modernity in America and Russia* Chap. 6





# Gospel Christianity

## What is Jesus' mission?

### Study 7 | Course 1

Many think of salvation mainly in terms of individual forgiveness and change. But God's plans for the world extend beyond this — to the coming of the "kingdom."

### KEY CONCEPT – KINGDOM

Read & mark: "?" – Question raised; "!" – Insight helpful

#### The prediction of the kingdom

- The world was created as a place of complete flourishing and harmony under the rule of God.
- Sin, resistance to God's authority, led to the unraveling of creation.
  - a) Relationships with God, other races and classes, individuals and physical nature itself disintegrate where God is not acknowledged as King.
- But God reveals that redemption will ultimately entail the complete healing of creation, including social justice, the reunification of all humanity and the end of physical decay and death (Is 11:1-10).

#### The definition of the kingdom

- The kingdom of God, then, is the renewal of all creation by the re-entry of God's ruling power through Christ's death and resurrection.
- Hearts, relationships, communities, and practices are healed and re-woven with one another to the degree that they come under the authority of Jesus, through his Word and Spirit (Ps 72; Col 1:16-20 and Eph 1:9-10).

#### Entering the kingdom

- The kingdom is entered by repentance and faith (Mark 1:15), forgiveness (Col 1:13-14) and the new birth (John 3:3, 5).
- The kingdom begins to renovate our heart-character into goodness, peace and joy (Rom 14:17).

#### "Thinking" the kingdom

- Things in the world are only properly understood when viewed through an understanding of the kingdom.

- We only understand a thing if we realize:
  - a) it was created originally good in itself
  - b) it is fallen and marred by sin
  - c) it can eventually be redeemed under Christ the healing king

**Living the kingdom means:***Grace and Freedom*

The alternative to Christ's kingdom in my personal life is slavery to personal idols.

- Anything more important than Christ for happiness (e.g. successful career or happy family) becomes a master because it is a savior.
- When Jesus is Savior and Lord, his kingdom liberates from the power of false masters (e.g. from drivenness over work, excessive anxiety over children.)

*Peace and Justice*

The alternative to Christ's kingdom in social relationships is slavery to social idols.

- The world-system attaches high value to power, comfort, success and recognition.
- But God's kingdom is won not through strength and accomplishment but through the cross.
  - a) It is entered not by the strong but by those who admit their weakness and need for grace.
- This completely changes our attitude toward the poor, the powerless and the marginal.
  - a) Working toward the peace and social justice God will eventually bring is a sign of the kingdom.

**Work and Witness**

The alternative to Christ's kingdom in your vocation and work is to be controlled by cultural idols — ideologies.

- Every field of human endeavor puts forth something other than God — financial profit, individual rights or happiness, human reason, group power — as the ultimate value and goal.

- Thus when we do our work with kingdom values, it will be distinctive from the work carried on under the power of ideologies.

**The stages of the kingdom**

- The Bible tells us the kingdom has arrived (Lk 17:20-21; Mt 12:28) but not fully (Mt 6:10; 25:34).
  - a) Like a seed it is nearly hidden, but will grow into fullness (Mt 13:31-42).
  - b) It is already, but not yet, here.
- We must keep this in mind to avoid either over-optimism or over-pessimism in our ministry.

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?****2. What difference should it make to the way a local church ministers, that God's salvation will eventually not just save our souls but restore all of creation?**

## BIBLE STUDY

Mark 1:14-2:17

1. What can you deduce about the kingdom of God from vv.14-15?
2. What can you deduce about the kingdom from the incidents of 1:16-2:17?

## READINGS

Read & mark: "?" – Question raised; "!" – Insight helpful

[In the Gospel of Mark], God's... invasion of the world has wrought an inversion: God has reversed the positions of insiders and outsiders. Those who are in positions of authority and privilege reject Jesus and the message. However, people of low or despised position in the social world of first-century Jewish culture receive the gospel gladly, for their need is great. The lepers, the demon-possessed, Gentile women (7:24-30), the Gentile centurion at the cross (15:39) [show] faithful response to Jesus. "Many who are the first will be the last, and the last will be first." (10:31) Those familiar with the story should not under-estimate the shock of this inversion.

– Richard Hays <sup>1</sup>

The renewal of Christ's salvation ultimately includes a renewed universe... Christ's miracles were miracles of the kingdom, performed as signs of what the kingdom means... His blessing was pronounced upon the poor, the afflicted, the burdened and heavy-laden who came to Him and believed in Him... The miraculous signs that attested Jesus' deity and authenticated the witness of those who transmitted the gospel to the church is not continued, for their purpose was fulfilled. But the pattern of the kingdom that was revealed through those signs must continue in the church... Kingdom evangelism is therefore holistic as it transmits by word and deed Christ's promise for body and soul as well as Christ's demand for body and soul.

– Ed Clowney <sup>2</sup>

The coming of the kingdom of God represents a final state of cosmic redemption, in which God and God's creatures dwell together in harmony and righteousness. It [represents] *shalom* — universal flourishing, wholeness, and delight... On the one hand, we need to avoid triumphalism, the prideful view that we Christians will fully succeed in transforming all or much of culture... On the other hand, we need to avoid the despairing tendency to write the world off and to remove ourselves to an island of like-minded Christians. The world, after all, belongs to God and is in the process of being redeemed by God. God's plan is to gather up *all things* in Christ (Eph 1:9-10). Christians have been invited to live beyond triumphalism and despair, spending ourselves for a cause we firmly believe will win in the end. In a vision lovely enough to break a person's heart, John shows us [in Revelation 21] that heaven comes to us and renews *this* world.

– Cornelius Plantinga <sup>3</sup>

The great danger is always to single out some aspect of God's good creation and identify it, rather than [sin], as the villain in the drama of human life... In the course of history this "something" has been variously identified as... the body and its passions (Plato and much Greek philosophy), human culture in distinction from nature (Rousseau and Romanticism), authority figures in society and family (Freud and depth psychology), economic forces [Marx and communism] or any number of things... As far as I can tell, the Bible is unique in its rejection of all attempts to either demonize some part of creation as the root of our problems or to idolize some part of creation as the solution.

– Al Wolters 4

#### Application questions

1. **The Hays and Clowney quotes discuss how the Kingdom means peace and justice. Brainstorm some more ways that you can work for peace and justice in society, and work with Christian distinctiveness in your vocation.**
2. **The Plantniga quote talks about the balance we must strike. What are the practical implications of the fact that the kingdom of God is already, but not yet, here?**

3. Discuss Al Wolters quote. Give other examples of how a misunderstanding of the nature of the kingdom has led to erroneous beliefs and philosophies.

**For further study**

Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World: A Christian Vision of Faith, Learning, and Living* (Eerdmans, 2002.)

1 R.Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*.

2 E.P. Clowney "Kingdom Evangelism" in *The Pastor-Evangelist*, R. Greenway, ed. (Presbyterian and Reformed)

3 Cornelius Plantinga, *Engaging God's World* (Eerdmans, 2002.) p. 103-104, 137-138.

4 Al Wolters, *Creation Regained* (IVP, 1985) p. 50.

5 See Francis Schaeffer, *True Spirituality* (Tyndale, 1971), p.134.





# Gospel Christianity

## Why can't I do this alone?

### Study 8 | Course 1

The gospel liberates individuals but it does so both through and for deep community.

### KEY CONCEPT – COMMUNITY

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

#### God and community

The Triune Christian God is the only God who *is* a community.

- If God was eternally uni-personal, then love would be something that even God only knew secondarily, after he began to create other beings.
- But since God is tri-personal, love and friendship are *intrinsic* to ultimate reality.
- Therefore deep personal relationships are a good thing in themselves. They are what the universe is all about.

#### Salvation and community

Jesus said: *“This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent”* (John 17:3).

- To know someone is to have a personal relationship with him or her. Jesus is saying that the thing you most need in the world is a personal relationship with God.
- This is not only the heart of New Testament religion, but of Old Testament religion. *“You will be my people, and I will be your God”* (Exodus 6:7).
- This statement tells us that salvation:
  - a) brings you into intimacy with God (signified by the pronouns *my* and *your*)
  - b) brings you into a community with others (you become part of a people)

#### Mission and community

Jesus prayed for his followers saying: *“Father, may all of them be one, just as you are in me and I am in you... that the world may believe you have sent me”* (John 17:21). Our loving unity is therefore the best declaration of the gospel to the world.

- In Matt 5:14-16, Jesus tells his followers they are a “city set on a hill” whose visible behavior shines out and shows the world the glory of God.
- What does it mean for Christians to be a “city” that the world can see (*‘on a hill’*)? It means that we are to be an alternate city in every city. The implications:
  - a) We are to reach out and bring into our Christian communities all the kinds of people in the city.
  - b) We are to model alternate ways to do everything — commerce, learning, art, sexuality, race relations, material sharing — everything.
  - c) Sex, money, and power are to be used in life-giving and non-destructive or addictive ways.
- Jesus’ command here is a corporate command. You can’t obey it alone. You cannot be an alternate city by yourself!

### Character and community

Character is mainly shaped by the people with whom we eat, play, converse, counsel and study. It is therefore our primary social community that makes us what we are at the deepest level.

- All the “one another” passages of the Bible apply to this aspect of Christian community. We are to:
  - a) honor one another (Rom 12:10)
  - b) accept one another (Rom 15:7)
  - c) bear with one another (Col 3:12-13)
  - d) forgive one another (Eph 4:2,32)
  - e) pray for and confess sins to one another (James 5:16)
  - f) cheer and challenge one another (Heb.3:13)
  - g) admonish and confront one another (Rom 15:14; Gal 6:1-6)
  - h) warn one another (1 Thess 5:14)
  - i) instruct one another (Col. 3:16)
- We are to stop gossiping and slandering (Gal 5:15) or being fake (Rom 12:9) with each other.
- We are to bear burdens (Gal 6:2), share possessions (Acts 4:32ff) and submit to the needs (Eph 5:21) of each other.

**Summary**

The purpose of Jesus' salvation is not just to save individuals but to form a new, alternate society that is a sign that Jesus is Lord of the world and is going to redeem all of creation. We will not know God, win the world, nor change deeply apart from community.

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?**

**2. Think of some specific ways in which the church can be a counter-culture that shows the world how the gospel changes the way we use sex, money and power.**

## Ephesians 2:14-22

- 1. vv.19-22. Meditate on the different images Paul uses. What does each of the three images tell us about Christian unity and community?**
- 2. Draw some practical implications for community. If we are a nation, a family and a temple, how should that effect the way we live?**
- 3. vv.14-16. What is Paul saying in this particular image? How does this statement relate to the claim in 1 Peter 2:9 that we are a “chosen people... a holy nation?”**

## READINGS

Read & mark: "?" – Question raised; "!" – Insight helpful

*"Let us have no vainglory — provoking one another, envying of one another.* (Gal 5:26). This verse shows that our conduct to others is determined by our opinion of ourselves. It is when we have [*"vain-glory"*] that we... adopt one of these two attitudes. If we regard ourselves as superior we *"provoke"* (the Greek word means 'to challenge')... but if we regard ourselves as inferior we *"envy."* In both cases our attitude is due to *"vainglory"* or *"conceit,"* to our having such a fantasy opinion of ourselves... Very different is that love which is the fruit of the Spirit... The Holy Spirit has opened their eyes to see both their own sin and unworthiness and also the importance and value of... people in the sight of God.

– J. Stott <sup>1</sup>

Those who are not secure in Christ cast about for spiritual life preservers with which to support their confidence, and in their frantic search they cling not only to the shreds of ability and righteousness they find in themselves, but they fix upon their race, their membership in a party, their familiar social and ecclesiastical patterns, and their culture as means of self-recommendation. The culture is put on as though it were armor against self-doubt, but it becomes a mental straitjacket which cleaves to the flesh and can never be removed except through comprehensive faith in the saving work of Christ... Once faith is exercised, a Christian is free... to wear his culture like a comfortable suit of clothes. He can shift to other cultural clothing temporarily if he wishes, as Paul suggests (I Cor 9:19-23) and is released to admire and appreciate the differing expressions of Christ shining out through other cultures

– Richard Lovelace <sup>2</sup>

In each of my friends there is something that only some other friend can fully bring out. By myself I am not large enough to call the whole man into activity; I want other lights than my own to show all his facets. Now that Charles is dead, I shall never again see Ronald's reaction to a specifically Charles joke. Far from having more of Ronald, having him "to myself" now that Charles is away, I have less of Ronald. Hence true friendship is the least jealous of loves. Two friends delight to be joined by a third, and three by a fourth... we possess each friend not less but more as the number of those with whom we share him increases. In this, Friendship exhibits a glorious "nearness by resemblance" to Heaven... for every soul, seeing Him in her own way, communicates that unique vision to all the rest. That, says an old author, is why the Seraphim in Isaiah's vision are crying, "Holy, Holy, Holy" to one another (Is 6:3). The more we share the Heavenly Bread between us, the more we shall all have,

– C. S. Lewis <sup>3</sup>

If the Church is to be effective and advocate a new [kingdom]order... it must itself be a new social order... The local congregation... stands not primarily as the promoter of programs for social change (although it will be that) but primarily as itself the foretaste of a different social order. Its actions for justice and peace will be, and will be seen to be, the overflow of a life in Christ, where God's justice and God's peace are already an experienced treasure.

– Lesslie Newbigin <sup>4</sup>

The church is... made up of natural enemies. What binds us together is not common education, common race, common income levels, common politics, common nationality, common accents, common jobs, or anything else of that sort. Christians come together... because they have all been saved by Jesus Christ... They are a band of natural enemies who love one another for Jesus' sake.

– D. Carson <sup>5</sup>

### Application questions

#### 1. Which statements impressed you and why?

2. Consider the Stott quote. "Vainglory" (Greek kenodoxos) literally means empty of glory or significance. How does the gospel heal this condition and therefore lay a basis for renewed human relationships?
3. Consider the Lewis and Carson quotes. a) How have you learned new things about Christ from your community with other believers? b) Share some personal testimonies of how you have seen the gospel bring together some natural enemies.
4. Consider the Lovelace quote. How does the gospel help us overcome cultural barriers?
5. Consider the Newbigin quote. Brainstorm practical ways in which your own small group can deepen its life together as a close-knit family, and shape its life together as a distinctive Christian counter-culture.

- 1 John Stott, *The Message of Galatians* (IVP, 1968) pp.156-157.
- 2 Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life* (IVP, 1979) pp. 198-199.
- 3 C.S. Lewis, *The Four Loves* (Harcourt and Brace, 1971) p.61-62.
- 4 Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Eerdmans)
- 5 D.A.Carson, *Love In Hard Places* (Crossway, 2002) p. 61.



# Gospel Christianity

## How do we know about Jesus?

### Study 9 | Course 1

Virtually everything we know about God and Christ is from the Bible. But why should we believe it, and how do we understand what it says?

#### KEY CONCEPT – BIBLE

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

#### **Why we should believe it**

Many say that the Biblical accounts of Jesus are legendary and can't be trusted. There are three insurmountable problems with this view.

##### **The timing is too early to be legend.**

- Legends are written down centuries after all living eyewitnesses are gone. But Mark and Luke wrote just 30-40 years after the death of Jesus.
- If Jesus did *not* feed a crowd of thousands, you might get away with claiming he did after 200 years, but not after only 30 years when hundreds of witnesses still lived.
- These accounts were circulated too soon to be fabricated.

##### **The content is too counter-productive to be legend.**

- It is typical to say that the followers of Jesus made up stories of his life to promote their movement. But why make up a story that:
  - a) Jesus died on a cross crying out that God had forsaken him?
  - b) In Gethsemane he wished he could avoid the cross?
  - c) The first eyewitnesses of the resurrection were women?
- All of these elements were highly offensive to all first century readers. The only historically plausible reason that these incidents would be put in these accounts is that they happened.

##### **The literary form is too detailed to be legend.**

- In John 21, the disciples catch 153 fish.
- In John 8, Jesus doodles with his finger in the dust, though we are never told what he wrote.

- Ancient legends never included such details, which contribute nothing to plot or character.
- Modern realistic narrative fiction began only about 400 years ago.
- The only reason an ancient writer would include 153 fish was that it was part of the eyewitness account. Someone had remembered it.

**How we should interpret it.**

If Jesus is divine, we should read the Bible as he did.

**Jesus read the Bible as God's word so that "what Scripture says, God says."**

- He read the Bible as:
  - a) supernatural revelation (Jn 5:37-39; Mt 19:4-5)
  - b) inspired in every single part (Jn 10:34-35; Mt 5:17,19)
  - c) authoritative and "unbreakable" (John 10:35; Mk 7:1-13)
  - d) sufficient for salvation (Lk 16:15-31; Jn 5:39-40)
- He based even the smallest details of his life on the Scripture (John 19:28).

**Jesus read the Bible as being all about himself (Lk 24:44-45; Jn 5:39-46).**

- Every part of the Bible tells us something about Jesus and about how God redeems us through him.
  - a) Jesus is the true Adam who passed the test in the garden.
  - b) He is the true Moses who leads us out of slavery.
  - c) He is the true Job — the innocent sufferer who intercedes for his friends.
  - d) He is the true David, whose victory becomes his people's, though they never lifted a stone to accomplish it.

**In the end, there are only two ways to read the Bible; is it basically about me or basically about Jesus?**

- Is it basically a set of moral principles — about what I must do?
- Or is it basically the story of Jesus — about what he has done?

- a) Unless I see his ultimate generosity — giving everything up for me on the cross — I won't have the security or incentive to be generous with my money.
- b) Unless I see him forgiving me on the cross, I won't have what it takes to forgive others.
- As only principles of living, the Bible is a crushing burden.
- The Bible is not primarily a "book of virtues." It is the story of how God is redeeming us through Jesus Christ.

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?**

**2. Think of the Biblical account of David and Goliath. If you look at the story in itself, apart from the rest of the Bible — then what is its main message or teaching to the reader? If you look at the story as part of the Bible's overall story — about how God saves us by grace through Christ — then what is its main message or teaching?**

## BIBLE STUDY #1

2 Peter 1:16-21

1. **Who is Peter referring to in vv.16-18? Who is he referring to in vv.19-21?**
2. **What claims does Peter make about the testimony of the New Testament writers and the Old Testament writers?**

Luke 24:13-27, 44-49

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## READINGS

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

I have read in Plato and Cicero sayings that are very wise and very beautiful; but I never read in either of them “*Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden.*”

– Augustine <sup>1</sup>

I have been reading poems, romances, vision literature, legends, and myths all my life. I know what they are like. I know none of them are like this. Of this [gospel] text there are only two possible views. Either this is reportage... or else, some unknown [ancient] writer... without known predecessors or successors, suddenly anticipated the whole technique of modern novelistic, realistic narrative... The reader who doesn't see this has simply not learned how to read.

– C.S. Lewis <sup>2</sup>

Paul described [the Scripture] as “*inspired*” (2 Tim 3:15-17) that is, entirely “God-breathed” — a product of God's Spirit (“breath”). Truth in the Bible means stability, reliability, firmness, trustworthiness, the quality of a person who is entirely self-consistent, sincere, realistic, undeceived. God is such a person: truth, in this sense, is his nature, and he has not got it in him to be anything else. That is why he cannot lie (Titus 1:2; Num 23:19; 1 Sam 15:29; Heb 6:18). That is why his words to us are true, and cannot be other than true. They are the index of reality: they show us things as they really are. [But] the word which God addresses directly to us is an instrument not only of government but also of fellowship. He made us with the intention that we might walk together forever in a love relationship. But such a relationship can exist only when the parties know something of each other. God, our Maker, knows all about us before we say anything; but we can know nothing of him unless he tells us. Therefore, God sends his word... to woo us as well as to instruct us.

– J. I. Packer <sup>3</sup>

All Bible readers should learn the basic principles for interpreting it. First, we look for the *natural, original* meaning of the text, remembering that the plain and obvious meaning is sometimes not literal but figurative... We have to avoid reading our... thoughts back into the mind of the authors. The key questions are what they themselves intended to say and how they will have been understood by their contemporaries. For this we will need to know something about the historical and cultural background of the Bible. Secondly... we look for the *general* meaning. That is, we must interpret each text in the light both

of its immediate context in the book concerned and of its wider context in the Bible as a whole... We will be right to seek harmony by allowing Scripture to interpret Scripture... and not "so expound one place of Scripture that it be repugnant to another." (The Thirty-Nine Articles)

– J. Stott <sup>4</sup>

There are great stories in the Bible... but it is possible to know Bible stories, yet miss the Bible story... The Bible has a story line. It traces an unfolding drama. The story follows the history of Israel, but it does not begin there, nor does it contain what you would expect in a national history....If we forget the story line... we cut the heart out of the Bible. Sunday school stories are then told as tamer versions of the Sunday comics, where Samson substitutes for Superman. David... becomes a Hebrew version of Jack the Giant Killer. No, David is not a brave little boy who isn't afraid of the big bad giant. He is the Lord's anointed... God chose David as a king after his own heart in order to prepare the way for David's great Son, our Deliverer and Champion...

– E. Clowney <sup>5</sup>

### Application questions

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?**

**2. Why, as Packer says, is belief in the authority of the Bible important in order to have a personal relationship with the Lord?**

3. Someone may say: "You say we believe the Bible because Jesus does — but the only place I know this is from the Bible! That is circular reasoning!" Formulate an answer.
4. Someone may say: "I don't believe in taking the Bible literally." Look at the Stott quote and formulate an answer.
5. Someone may say: "I don't think it matters whether the gospels are a reliable history or not. All that matters is that I experience spiritual meaning when I read them." Formulate an answer.



1 Quoted in Frank Mead, ed. 12,000 Religious Quotations (Baker, 1989), p. 50.

2 Find it!

3 J. I. Packer Concise Theology (IVP, UK, 1993), p.4 and Knowing God (IVP, 1993) p.110, 113.

4 John Stott, Christian Basics (Baker, 1991).p.116.

5 Edmund Clowney, The Unfolding Mystery (Presbyterian and Reformed)



# Gospel Christianity

## Where do we live out the Gospel?

### Study 10 | Course 1

God wants us to embody and witness to his gospel and kingdom wherever we live. There is no more important place to do this than the city.

#### KEY CONCEPT – CITY

Read & mark: “?” – Question raised; “!” – Insight helpful

##### **The Original City – Creation**

God began history in a garden (Gen 2) but he will end it in a city (Rev 21-22). When Jesus is finished redeeming the world, it will be urban, a place of diversity, density and creativity. God through Christ is building a city (Heb 11:10). The idea of the city is therefore God’s invention. So originally —

- Cities were to be places of refuge and safety.

The city wall made life secure within (Ps 25:28; Neh 1:3-4). Cities were the best places for women and children, minorities, immigrants, and others with less power in a society.

- Cities were to be places of justice.

The city gate was the place where trials were conducted. Outside it was “every man for himself,” where conflicts were resolved with sheer power (Num 35:9-24; Pr 22:22).

- Cities were to be places where culture was forged.

The city market square was where the most numerous and diverse commercial, social, political and cultural connections could be made. From these interactions, new cultural movements were forged and flowed out to the rest of society.

- Cities were designed to be places of faith.

The city’s highest tower (castle, minaret, cathedral or office skyscraper) indicated the city’s faith — what most of the people are working for and looking to for their significance.

##### **The Broken City – Fall**

Today, the city is still the place of refuge for minorities, still the place where laws are made and enforced, still the main place culture is forged and disseminated, and still a place of great spiritual seeking and finding. But sin has broken cities so that none of the original purposes are being properly realized.

- The Bible denounces the cities as places of violence, injustice and unbelief (Micah 3:9-11).
- While the city still produces culture, it does so in a way that glorifies human beings or things rather than God.
- Should we abandon cities? No. The family and the church are also deeply marred and twisted by sin, but we don't discard them. We seek to rehabilitate them by the grace of God.

### God's Alternative City – Redemption

The "city of man" is built on the principle of individual self-aggrandizement. "*Let us make a name for ourselves*" (Gen 11:1-4). But God's city is built on service, not selfishness, and on bringing joy to the world with its cultural riches.

- Jesus established his church as a "city on a hill" which shows the world God's glory with its good deeds (Matt 5:14-17).
- Christians are called to be an alternative city within every earthly city, to show how sex, money and power can be used in non-destructive ways, and to show how people can get along in Christ who cannot get along outside of him.
- Thus the citizens of God's city are always the *best possible* citizens of their earthly city.

### Why be in the city?

Paul's mission centered on cities and ignored the countryside (cf. Acts 16:8-9 with v.12).

- Why? In the city
  - a) People were more open to new ideas
  - b) The centers of law, politics and art were more accessible
  - c) Every race and nationality could hear the truth.
- By 300 A.D., fifty percent of the city populations were Christian while the countryside was pagan (the word *paganus* probably meant "rural dweller").
- As the city goes, so goes all of society (eventually).
- So it is today. If a Christian can live in the city, it is (overall) the most strategic place to be.

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?**

**2. In light of the Biblical material above, formulate some answers to the following common objections to living in the city?**

## BIBLE STUDY

Jeremiah 29:1-14

After rebelling against its Babylonian overlords, Jerusalem was destroyed and the elite of Jewish society were taken to Babylon by force — the artisans and professionals and leaders (v.2). The prophet Jeremiah received a word from the Lord and wrote the exiles a letter.

- 1. What wrong policies and attitudes toward the city were being promoted by the false prophets? (cf. vv.8-9 with vv.4-7). What parallels are there with Christians' policies and attitudes toward the city today?**
- 2. What specific directions does God give the exiles on how to relate to the city of Babylon in vv.4-7? How can we apply these to ourselves today in the city?**
- 3. What is the relationship between the peace/wholeness of v.11 and the peace/wholeness of v.7a?**

## READINGS

Read & mark: "?" – Question raised; "!" – Insight helpful

"When the righteous prosper, the city rejoices." – *Proverbs 11:10*

Christianity served as a revitalization movement that arose in response to the misery, chaos, fear and brutality of life in the urban Greco-Roman world... Christianity revitalized life in... cities by providing new norms and new kinds of social relationships able to cope with many urgent urban problems. To cities filled with the homeless and impoverished, Christianity offered charity as well as hope. To cities filled with newcomers and strangers, Christianity offered an immediate basis for attachments. To cities filled with orphans and widows, Christianity provided a new and expanded sense of family. To cities torn by violent ethnic strife, Christianity offered a new basis for social solidarity. And to cities faced with epidemics, fires and earthquakes, Christianity offered effective... services.

– Rodney Stark <sup>1</sup>

God in our time is moving climactically through a variety of social, political, and economic factors to bring earth's people into closer contact with one another, into greater interaction and interdependence, and into earshot of the gospel. Through worldwide migration to the city, God may be setting the stage for Christian mission's greatest and perhaps final hour... now that a majority of the world's unreached populations live in cities... To ignore the plight of the urban masses or refuse to grapple with the trials and complexities of city life is worse than merely a strategic error. It is unconscionable disobedience to God, whose providence directs the movements of people and creates missionary opportunity. [Acts 17:27-28: "He determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him..."]

– Roger Greenway <sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the best analogy to describe all this is that of a model home. We are God's demonstration community of the rule of Christ in the [unbelieving] city. On a tract of earth's land, purchased with the blood of Christ, Jesus the kingdom developer has begun building new housing. As a sample of what will be, he has erected a model home of what will eventually fill the urban neighborhood. He now invites the... world into that model home to take a look at what will be. The church is the occupant of that model home, inviting

neighbors into its open door to Christ. Evangelism is when the signs are up, saying 'Come in and look around'... As citizens of, not survivalists in, this new city within the old city, we see our ownership as the gift of Jesus the Builder (Luke 17:20-21). As residents, not pilgrims, we await the kingdom coming when the Lord returns from his distant country (Luke 19:12). The land is already his... in this model home we live out our new lifestyle as citizens of the heavenly city that one day will come. We do not abandon our jobs or desert the city that is... We are to "seek the peace and prosperity of the city" to which God called us in exile (Jer.29:7).

– Harvie Conn <sup>3</sup>

#### **Application questions**

**1. Which statements impressed you and why?**

**2. How can a church's "prosperity" be the joy of a pagan city, when so many of its residents are not believers?**



3. Look at Conn's quote. How is the setting of the city conducive to showing the world the nature of the kingdom?

**For further study:**

Ray Bakke, *The Urban Christian* (IVP)

1 Rodney Stark, *The Rise of Christianity* (Harper, 1996), p.161.

2 Roger Greenway, "World Urbanization and Missiological Education," in *Missiological Education for the Twenty-First Century: Essays in Honor of Paul Pierson* (Orbis, 1996).

3 Harvie Conn, *Planting and Growing Urban Churches: From Dream to Reality* (Baker, 1997), p.202.

4 Orlando Costas, "A Holistic Concept of Church Growth," *Exploring Church Growth*, ed. Wilbert Shenk (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), pp. 95-107.

5 Richard Lovelace, *The Dynamics of Spiritual Life*, p.199.







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