

Gospel Christianity

Participants 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?**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 ¹

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

- Richard Lovelace²

1. Which statements impressed you and why?

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)

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

² 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?

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?**

- 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 ¹

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 ²

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 ³

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 ⁴

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)

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

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

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

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

⁵ 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 ¹

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* ²

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 ³

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 ⁴

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

– Derek Kidner ⁵

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 ⁶

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

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)

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

² 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.

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

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

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

⁶ 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 ¹

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 ²

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 ³

[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 ⁴

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 ⁵

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 ⁶

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)⁷

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 ¹

- notes

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?
2. vv.24-26 Why does God only justify through his atoning sacrifice? Why can’t God just forgive us?
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 ⁴

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 ⁵

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 ⁶

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 ⁷

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 ⁸

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

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.

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

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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 ¹

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 ²

“‘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 ³

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 ⁴

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 ¹

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 ²

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 ³

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 ¹

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 ²

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 ³

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 ⁴

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 ⁵

Application questions

1. Which statements impressed you and why?

- notes*

- 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 ¹

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 ²

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 ³

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 ⁴

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 ⁵

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 ¹

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 ²

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 ³

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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