

2016 DEEPER YOUTH CONFERENCE



GOSSPEL

GOOD NEWS FOR A DESPERATE WORLD

Edited by Luke Dockery



Gospel: Good News for a Desperate World
Edited by Luke Dockery

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LUKE DOCKERY

INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DYC '16 was the third iteration of the Deeper Youth Conference, and while some things changed, the main emphasis remained exactly the same: putting together a conference which focused on providing quality classes to help teens develop and deepen a lasting faith in Jesus Christ.

The theme for DYC '16 was "Gospel", and more than ever before, I felt that our theme was both theologically significant and desperately needed. Our keynote speaker, Steve Cloer, challenged us to know what the Gospel is and to be ready to share it with others, and the various classes brought out different aspects of the Good News in important and interesting ways.

I thought the content that was presented was outstanding, and represents the best effort we have made so far to have a tight and coherent series of presentations on one theme. This eBook is a reflection of the lessons that were presented, and will, I hope, be a blessing to you.

As part of our desire to push our students to be ready to share the story of the Good News in their own lives with others, we encouraged them to send in texts and tweets letting us know what they had learned about the Gospel. This was a fun and beneficial way to get our students to interact with the material to which they were being exposed.

I would like to thank all of the teachers and speakers who not only took part in the conference, but were also willing to do extra work and provide manuscripts of their lessons. This book is possible only because they were willing to do so.

Thanks to the Center Street Church of Christ for their hospitality in hosting the event, and to Darren Vaughn, the Center Street Youth Director, for his help in many different ways.

A huge thank you is in order to Jared Pack, who proofread the entire book, caught a lot of typos, and made many helpful editing suggestions. The product you hold in your hands (or read on your screen) would have been greatly diminished without his touch. Any errors which remain are, obviously, my responsibility.

Luke Dockery
Director, Deeper Youth Ministry
March 2017



STEVE CLOER has been the preaching minister at Southside Church of Christ in Fort Worth, Texas since 2006. Before that, he worked in youth and campus ministry.

He and his wife, Lindsay, currently have three children: Joshua, Bethany, and Lydia.

Steve graduated from Harding University with two B.A. degrees in Bible and Math. He received his M.Div. in New Testament from Harding School of Theology and graduated with his D.Min. in Congregational Mission and Leadership from Luther Seminary.

LEARNING TO SPEAK "GOSPEL"

STEVE CLOER

About two miles from our church building is the campus for Texas Christian University (TCU). A few years ago, I was on campus to have lunch with a TCU student. At the last minute, he invited one of his friends to join us. As we were having lunch, I casually asked this friend about his religious background. He told me that his mom was Baptist and his father was Muslim. He said he grew up going to church on Sundays and the mosque on Fridays. I thought, "This is interesting." So I started asking questions about how he reconciled the two. How did he understand Jesus, the Trinity, and so on? He started to give me his answers. He said that he could see there are differences between the two religions, but to him, it was more of a "both/and" kind of thing. Both religions were about God and both were about helping others. Then, he said to me, "What do you think?"

Now I want you to imagine you were in my shoes, what would you say? You don't have time to call up your preacher. You don't have time to schedule a Bible study. This was my first encounter with this student and frankly, I knew it would be my last. He was in his last semester and in just a couple of weeks, he was moving away. You just have this one shot to speak what you believe about Jesus. What would you say?

In his book, *Just Walk Across The Room*, Bill Hybels says that there are times in your life where we have what he calls, "a defining moment"—a moment where someone asks you a religious question, raises an issue,

and brings up a spiritual topic.¹ In that moment, you have an opportunity to share your faith. Hybels says you have about 30-45 seconds to offer your response. You don't have time to go into a long discussion—30-45 seconds to express your faith. That is what I had at that lunch at TCU. 30-45 seconds. What would you say?

This conference revolves around the word, "Gospel." The word basically means "good news." It was the report that a messenger would give when something really good had taken place. One of the first places that this word is used in the Bible is in the Book of Isaiah, chapter 52. In the Old Testament, cities would have people called watchmen who would sit on top of the wall of the city. Their job was to be the eyes and ears of the city. To see if there was an attacking army or some guest coming. Whenever the army of the city was out to battle, the watchman would be waiting for a messenger to come back from the battle to let them know whether it was a victory or a defeat. Isaiah 52.7 expresses this, "How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring gospel." That messenger bringing the good news back of victory. That's beautiful. That's gospel.

It is kind of like when something really good has happened to you. Maybe you aced the test. You got asked out on a date by that cute guy. You played great in the game. You come home. "Mom, Dad, guess what happened today...?" In that moment, you are delivering gospel.

As the church, what is our gospel? What is our good news?

One of my favorite gospels is the Gospel of Mark. If someone is new to the Bible and they are looking for a place to start, I always suggest this gospel. It is short, quick, and to the point. It shows Jesus in a very human way, which I love. But I also like the way it

¹Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room: Simple Steps Pointing People to Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 116.

begins. Mark 1.1 gives us the inside scoop on who Jesus is. In the rest of the gospel, the disciples, the Pharisees, and the crowd are trying to figure these things out. But we get the inside story, and are told three key truths about Jesus. First, he is the Messiah, or the King. Second, he is the Son of God, God in the flesh. Third, his coming brings good news. There is something about Jesus, his ministry, his life, and death that is good news, or gospel. What is that? What is the gospel that is found in Jesus?

This conference is about helping you answer the question, “What is our gospel?” so that you are prepared to speak and share the gospel in those 30-45 seconds that you have in the “defining” moments that occur. To answer that question, I believe you have to deal with two other questions. First, what is the gospel story? What is the big message of the Bible? What is the essence of our faith? What do we believe? If you were to summarize the story of Scripture into one or two sentences, what would it be? If you are going to understand and articulate the gospel, you have to be able to do that. You need to understand the broad story of God that we are a part of.

Second, how is the gospel good news to me? The gospel is not simply some set of truths that are out there somewhere. It is something personal and transformative. It impacts people and changes lives. How has this gospel message changed me? How has it changed others? How does it change the world? You cannot share the gospel unless you really believe it is good news for you and the rest of the world. But when we can answer these two questions concisely and concretely, when those defining moments come, we can confidently express the gospel, or good news, found in Jesus Christ. To help develop this, I am going to encourage you to tweet or text during this conference. I want you to come up with your brief answers to these questions: what is the gospel? How is it good news to the world?²

²See the Appendix beginning on p. 133.

A few years back, my brother-in-law was over at my house. My sister and brother-in-law and their family are missionaries in Asia. While they were staying at my house, we were outside for a bit. Our neighbor came over to meet them. He introduced himself and said that he was a missionary in Asia. Our neighbor, who did not go to church anywhere, asked, "Why do you live in India?" My brother-in-law said this, "I come from a family of alcoholics (both my father and grandfather) and God redeemed my family from this addiction and saved our lives. I decided at a young age to devote my life to Christ and to share this good news with others. So God called me to Asia to spread this good news to the people there." Do you know what my brother-in-law was doing? He was sharing gospel. His 30-45 second story of who God is and what God had done in his life. It had an impact on our neighbor. You can be someone like that. You can be that messenger with beautiful feet that brings the gospel to those around you.

It starts this weekend!



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WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

STEVE CLOER

To understand the gospel, or good news, it is best summarized in looking at the overall picture of the Bible. So this lesson is one attempt to give a brief overview of the story of the Bible and what God has done and is still doing to bring good news to this world. I have broken this lesson up into six chapters.³

Creation

In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. The earth was formless and void and darkness was over the surface of the deep and the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the waters. Then God said, "Let there be light" and there was light. God saw that the light was good and God separated light from darkness. God called the light day and the darkness he called night. And there was evening and morning, one day.

(Genesis 1.1-5)

The first chapter to God's story was that He created everything we see and experience. He formed the mountains, dug the valleys, and poured out the seas. He cast stars in the sky and hung the moon and sun. He filled the waters and sky with fish and birds and caused there to be vegetation on the earth. He created animals to walk upon the earth. His crowning point of creation was humanity. He breathed his Spirit into our flesh and made us in His likeness: "In the image of God,

³For further descriptions of the six stages in God's story, see Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2014).

he created him. Male and female he created them" (Genesis 1.27).

Through the whole creation process, God declared it to be good. There was order and harmony, interdependence, diversity, and variety. There was glory. "The heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork" (Psalm 19.1).

God blessed his creation and wanted it to flourish. He wanted humans to rule and take care of creation. He wanted the heavens and earth to continue to declare his glory. He wanted to dwell with His creation in an intimate, relational way. Yet, something happened to ruin this goal.



**The HEAVENS declare the GLORY of God and
the FIRMAMENT shows his HANDIWORK.**

-PSALM 19.1-

Curse

Therefore just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all men, because all sinned.

(Romans 5.12)

God placed the first humans, Adam and Eve, in the garden of Eden. In that garden, there was a tree of knowledge of good and evil. God made an explicit command to not eat of that tree. That tree represented the choice to either live dependent on God or independent of him. It represented freedom. By the deception of the serpent, Eve took the fruit. She gave some to Adam and he ate it too. Through this act of disobedience, they were asserting their independence. They were saying, "God we don't need you." We can do life on our own. We can make our own decisions. We can rule creation by ourselves. Our glory is more important than Your glory.

Immediately problems arose. Adam and Eve felt separation from God as they began to hide from Him. They felt separation from one another as they blamed each other. They felt separation from creation as the ground became cursed. The good world God had created became broken.

The situation just got worse. Cain committed the first murder. Death spreads to the human race. The curse of sin began to escalate to where every inclination of the heart became full of evil. All that God had made good was starting to unravel. There was bad news everywhere. The question was, "How can this be fixed?" What could be done to reconcile what is being torn apart? What can restore what is breaking? What can help creation declare God's glory again?

Israel

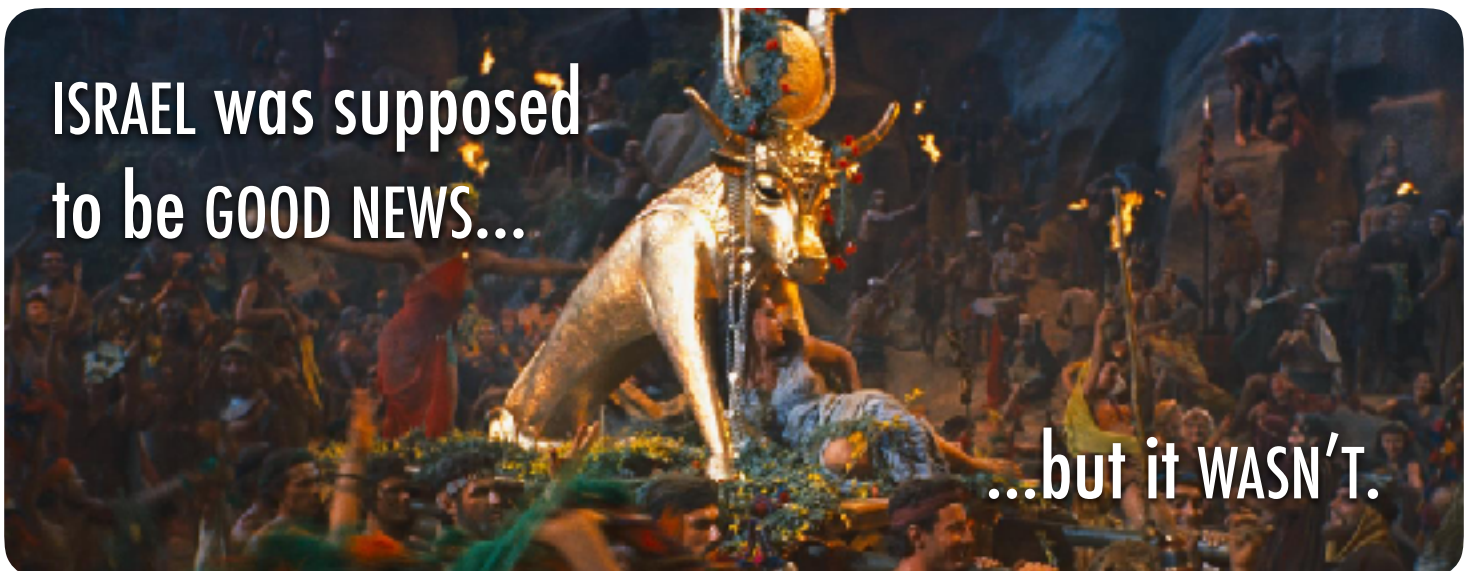
Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go forth from your country and from your relatives and from your father's house to the land which I will show you;

and I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you, I will make your name great and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth will be blessed."

(Genesis 12.1-3)

God began fixing his broken world by calling a man named Abraham. He called him to go to a different land so he could make him into a great nation. The purpose was not to build up Abraham's legacy, but that through him, all the earth would be blessed and restored.

Abraham had Isaac, who had Jacob, who had twelve sons, who turned into twelve tribes of Israel. These twelve tribes became enslaved in Egypt. But God through his mighty power rescued Israel. A new people was born. God took them to Sinai and gave them His law to teach them how to live and to make a covenant with them. He said, "You are to be a kingdom of priests and a holy nation" (Exodus 19.6). Israel was to be a light to the nations. Through them, God was going to fill the earth with his glory. Blessing and redemption were supposed to come. Israel was supposed to be good news, but it wasn't.



Almost immediately, we see how difficult it is for Israel to keep their covenant as when Moses comes down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, the people are worshipping an idol, a golden calf. But God is patient. He tries to teach them by sending them leaders, prophets, and judges.

He gives them land, the land of Canaan. They ask for a king and reluctantly He gives them one. He gives them a capital city, Jerusalem. He gives them a temple for his presence to dwell. But the people keep straying from God's covenant. They worship idols. They don't help the poor. They don't trust in God. They don't fulfill the purpose of being a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. Instead of being a light to the nations, they become like the nations. They are not good news.

Finally, God says, "Enough!" He sends the people into exile. He judges his own people. They lose their land, their temple, their capital, and their king. Yet, God offers a promise. Someday God would bring a new covenant. Someday he would send a new King who will lead the people in the right way. Someday he would give his people a new heart and spirit. God would use them to be a light to the world. But how was he going to do that? Here is where good news starts to come.

Christ

In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. All things were made through Him and without Him nothing was made that has been made. In Him was life and that life was the light of men...The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen His glory, the glory as of the one and only coming down from the Father, full of grace and truth.

(John 1.1-4, 14)

In a small town, while no one was watching, God broke into our world in the form of a tiny baby. Jesus Christ was his name. He grew up in Nazareth and began His ministry

in Galilee. He launched his ministry when he read a passage from Isaiah 61, a passage that talks about the Spirit anointing him to preach good news (gospel) to the poor, recovery of sight to the blind, release for the captives, and freedom for the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor (Luke 4.18-19).

After reading that, he said, "Today this is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4.21). Now is the time when God was going to restore His people and begin the process of fulfilling the promise to Abraham of bringing blessing and healing to a broken world.

A new King was here! This was good news. This new king went about doing three things: teaching, preaching, and healing. He taught about what it looks like when God is King: It means loving God with all of your heart, soul, mind, and strength. It means loving your neighbor as yourself.

He preached repentance and called people to deny themselves and take their cross and follow Him. He said if you want to be great, you need to become a servant. He introduced a new way of life, one of love, faithfulness, and mercy.

Then, he healed. He demonstrated that the brokenness of our world, the curse of sin, was being reversed. The lame began to walk, the poor were blessed, the lepers were cleansed, and the dead were raised. Then, Jesus suffered. He took the sin and brokenness of the world upon himself being beaten, ridiculed, and eventually dying on a cross. In that act, the guilt and power of sin was finally being broken.

Three days later, God raised Jesus by His power from the dead declaring Him as Lord over the world. He appeared to disciples proving that He was alive and sent them to be witnesses to this new life that could be found in Him. Then, he ascended back to heaven to his Father. What was going to happen? Who was going to carry on His ministry?

Church

When the day of Pentecost had come, they were all together in one place. And suddenly there came from heaven, a noise like a violent rushing wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. And there appeared to them tongues as of fire distributing themselves and they rested on each one of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance.

(Acts 2.1-4)

The Holy Spirit was poured out on the apostles of Jesus. It empowered them to be the witnesses Christ had called them to be of his life, death, and resurrection. Peter preached that in his first sermon and it convicted the listeners. They cried out, "What shall we do?"

Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized everyone of you in the name of Jesus and your sins will be forgiven and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit" (Acts 2.38). Three thousand people responded and were baptized. What we call the church was born. But really, God was simply fulfilling what he had promised. Israel was being restored. God's people were receiving a new covenant in Christ Jesus. A new heart and spirit were being given to them. Now, they were empowered by the Spirit to fulfill what God promised to Abraham: to be a blessing to the rest of the world.

There are two key differences between Israel and the Church. First, God's people were not based on ethnic background but relationship with Jesus. It did not matter whether you were Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female. All were now welcomed in Christ Jesus. Second, God's people were not simply to be passive lights for people to see; they were to go. They were to go throughout the world proclaiming the good news about Christ. So they did. Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, Titus and many

others traveled all over the Roman Empire declaring the good news. What energized them in this teaching and preaching was a promise.

New Creation

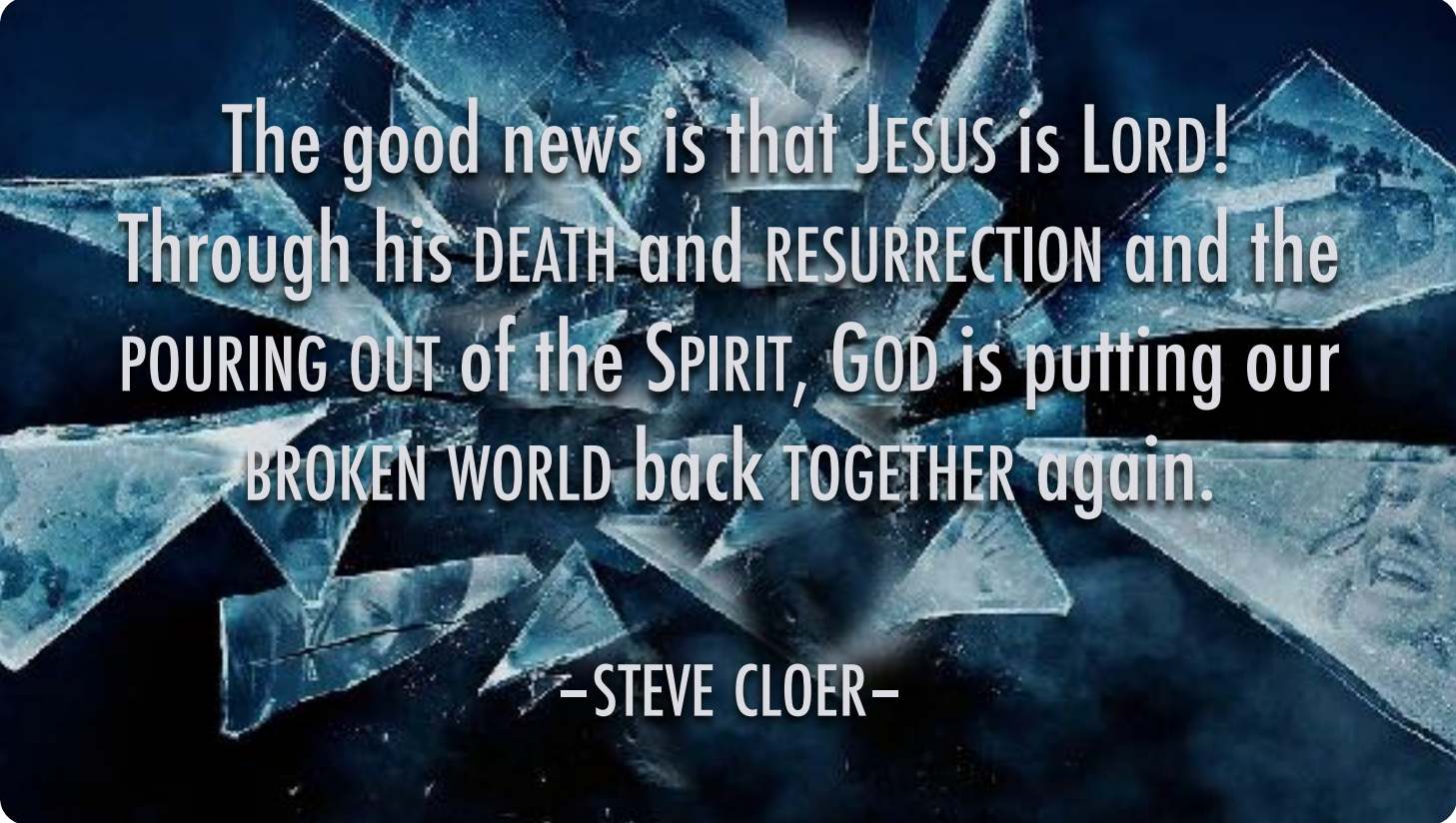
Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth passed away and there is no longer any sea. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne, saying, "Behold the tabernacle of God is among men, and He will dwell among them and they shall be His people and God Himself will be among them. And He will wipe away every tear from their eyes; and there will no longer be any death; there will no longer be any mourning, or crying, or pain; the first things have passed away." And He who sits on the throne said, "Behold I am making all things new."

(Revelation 21.1-5)

The promise was that God eventually was going to fully finish what He has started. Jesus is going to come back and this time, every knee will bow and every tongue will confess Jesus Christ is Lord. All that is evil, all that is rebellious, and all that is broken will be removed. Those that do not want the healing and forgiveness found in Christ will be separated. God will make all things new.

The curse of sin will no longer be present and God will be with His creation completely. The whole earth and heaven will fully declare his glory. We will live with Him and serve Him forever.

This is our story. This is what we believe. So what is the gospel? What is the good news that we believe? Did you catch it? The good news is that Jesus is Lord! Through his death and resurrection and the pouring out of the Spirit, God is putting our broken world back together again.



The good news is that JESUS is LORD!
Through his DEATH and RESURRECTION and the
POURING OUT of the SPIRIT, GOD is putting our
BROKEN WORLD back TOGETHER again.

—STEVE CLOER—

Maybe one way to describe it is with a puzzle. My girls love puzzles. When they were younger, they would do big, board puzzles. The way they would do it is that they would dump all the pieces on the floor. Everything would be scrambled. That is the way our world is: it is broken and the pieces are everywhere. We see it in the racial tensions, political backbiting, poverty, crime, a turning away from God. We see it in our own life: our selfishness, our inability to do what we know we should. The first step to putting together all of the pieces of a big, board puzzle is you have to find the board.

We have found the board. This is the good news. The board is Jesus. God through Jesus is reconciling all things back to Himself. Through his death and resurrection, sin is broken. We have an answer to the problems of our world: Jesus Christ.

Our response is two-fold. First, we are to receive that good news in our lives, and let Jesus be the Lord of our lives by repenting of sin and being baptized, just like in Acts. And start letting Jesus put our lives back together.

Second, we are to join with Jesus and His people to be a light to the world. To become partners in the gospel with other believers and to bring the message of healing of Jesus to rest of the world.

What is our response? What are we going to do with the good news?



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HOW IS THE GOSPEL "GOOD NEWS" TO THE WORLD?

STEVE CLOER

The king of Samaria, Jehoram, blames the situation on Elisha, the prophet. In fact, he claims he is going to kill Elisha for all the trouble and he sends a messenger to tell him such. But Elisha responds by saying that within 24 hours, there is going to be a complete turnaround. People are going to be eating bread and barley, not donkeys or humans.

The next morning, four men who had leprosy were outside the gate. They were mulling over their options. They thought, "We could stay here and we will die because we have no food." We could try to go inside the city, but there is no food there, and we will die. Or we could go out to the Aramean camp. They may share some food with us or they might kill us but that is not any worse than the other options. So they decide to go to the Aramean camp. When they get there, they find the strangest thing. In the middle of the night, the Arameans got scared. They thought they heard another army and they had fled. They left their gold, their silver, their army gear, and all of their food.

When these four starving lepers saw all of this food just leftover for them, they immediately started chowing down. They started taking the gold and silver back to their tents. They had hit the jackpot. But then one of them stopped and said, "Wait a second! We are not

doing right. This is a day of good news and we are keeping it to ourselves. If we wait until daylight, punishment will overtake us. Let's go at once and report this to the royal palace" (2 Kings 7.9).

The four men have a startling revelation. They have **gospel**. They have good news. The city is going to be saved because the army has left, and there is food, gold, and silver enough for everyone. Yet, they were just keeping it to themselves. That was not right. There were people starving just a few yards away. They needed to go at once and share the good news.

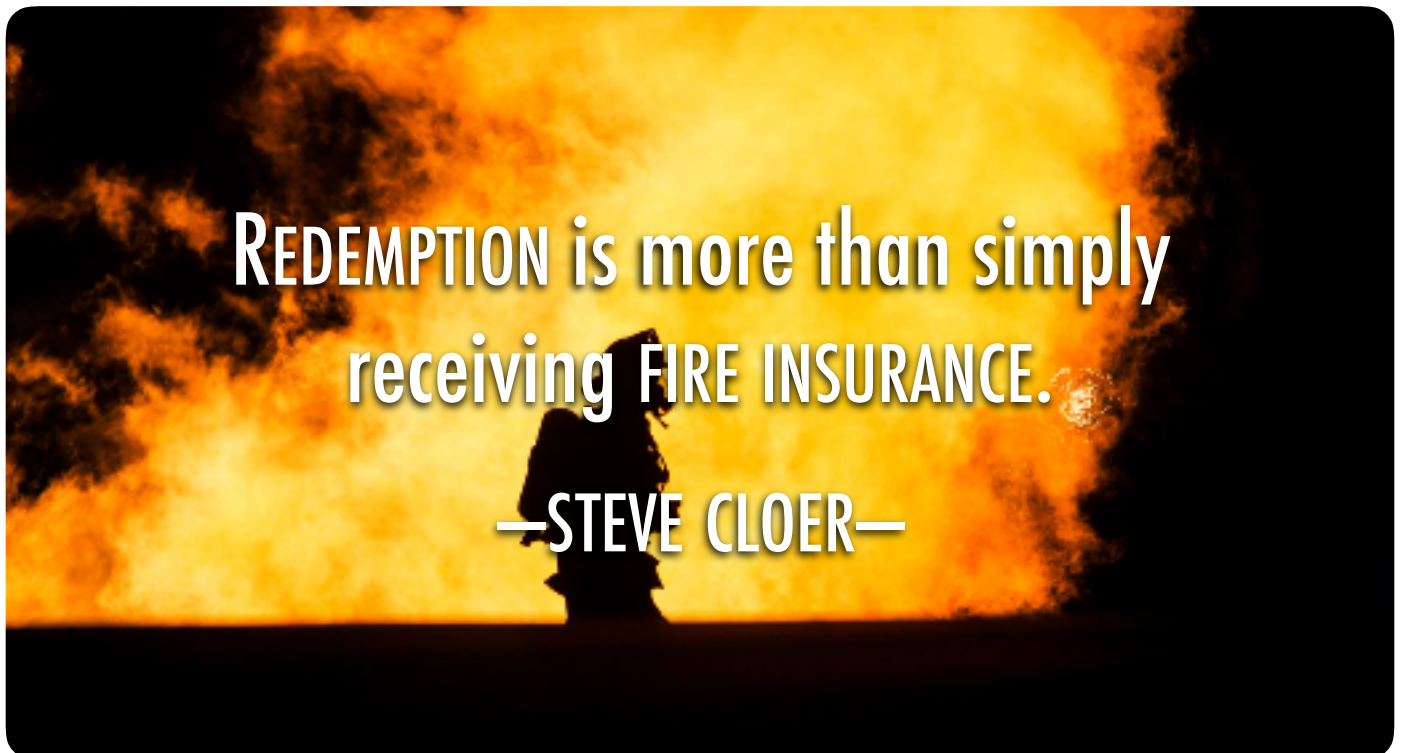


In many ways, this could be a parable for the church. We have **gospel**. We have good news. Jesus is Lord, and God is putting back together the brokenness in our lives and in the world through Jesus. This is really good news. Many of us have responded to this good news and are chowing down on the wonderful blessings that come from it. But we are just keeping it to ourselves and that is not right. There are many people yards away from us that are starving because of sin's brokenness. We need to go at once and share it.

Maybe one of the reasons that we do not share the gospel is that we are not really sure it is “gospel”: We know the story. We understand it. But we are not fully convinced that it is good news.

Part of the reason might be that we have not understood exactly what the gospel is. The gospel is not simply a set of truths to recite or explain. It is not simply a formula that we follow. It is a story of how God is redeeming the world through Jesus Christ. Redemption is more than simply receiving “fire insurance” or a “Get Out of Jail Free” card. I was teaching a class one time on baptism, and I asked this group of young adults to share about their baptism story. One young lady explained that she made the decision to be baptized when she was about to fly on a plane. She was deathly afraid of plane crashes, and she did not want to go to hell. So before she flew, she was baptized. I am glad that she is baptized. But there is more to redemption than just preparing for plane crashes!

Redemption is about transformation. It is about God making you and this world



new. Paul put it this way, "Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!" (2 Corinthians 5.14). The gospel is about finding newness. It is about shedding the evil habits of the past and becoming a new person in Christ with a new purpose and a new outlook. That is not something that happens in the future; it begins now! When we experience this kind of redemptive transformation in our lives, we join those lepers and say, "We have to tell more people about this."

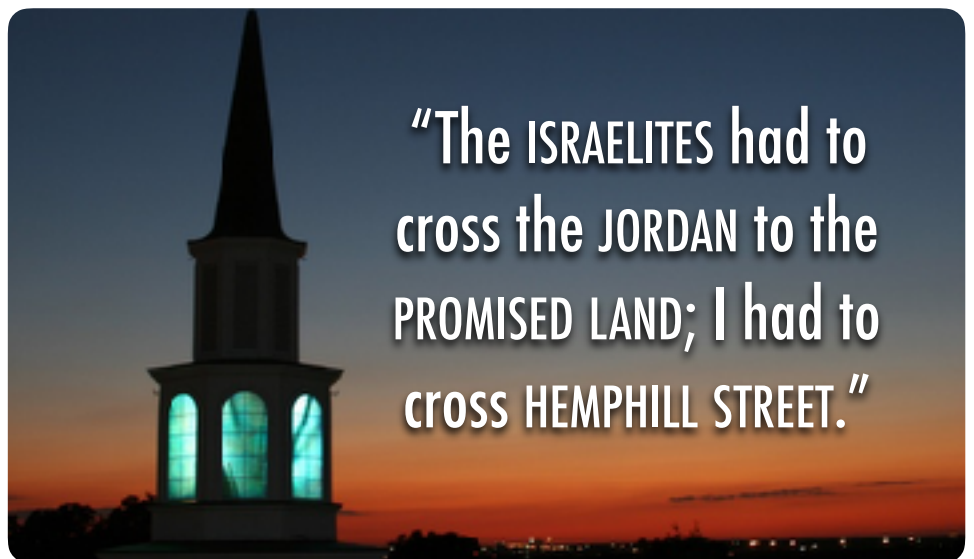
Take David as an example. David seemingly had everything—power, God's blessing, and wealth. But he made a terrible mistake. He lusted after a woman who was not his own, Bathsheba. He committed adultery and murdered one of his soldiers to cover it up. It was not until Nathan the prophet confronted David that he became convicted of his sin. In the midst of the guilt, he writes Psalm 51, an emotional psalm of contrition and repentance. He acknowledges his sin, "For I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me" (Psalm 51.3). He asks for transformation, "Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a steadfast spirit within me" (Psalm 51.10). He wants redemption, forgiveness, and change.

But notice what he says toward the end of the psalm. He commits to witnessing, "O Lord, open my lips, and my mouth will declare your praise" (Psalm 51.18). David is emotional as he writes these words. He recognizes that he has made a colossal mistake and hurt God and others. He feels guilt, embarrassment, and shame. He writes these words hoping that God will forgive and redeem Him. I feel that in this verse David is saying, "God, if this is who you are—a redeeming and forgiving God—then I will share the story." Once he experienced good news in his life, he was going to share that good news with others.

There is a critical principle here: **One does not share the good news until they have experienced good news in their life.** That is the nature of good news. You only

share it if you have received it and experienced it. Maybe another way of putting this: you have to have a story before you share the story.

A great illustration of this point is a lady named Jo-Ann. To understand Jo-Ann's story, you have to understand our church's context. We are in an urban neighborhood on a popular street, Hemphill Street, where there are quite a few vagrants nearby who struggle with drug addiction and homelessness. Jo-Ann was a drug dealer. She actually dealt drugs in the shadow of our church steeple. But God started working on her heart. It first started to turn when a mother who she sold drugs to got caught and Jo-Ann watched as a mother was taken from her child because she was buying drugs. That convicted her and made her think she needed to change. Soon after, she herself was caught and put in jail. While she was in prison, some women from our church taught her the Bible. Because of that previous conviction, she was ready to give her life to Jesus. So when she got out of jail, she came straight to our church and was baptized. On the very same street, where she sold drugs, she found new life in Jesus. She told me, "The Israelites had to cross the Jordan to the promised land; I had to cross Hemphill Street." Not too long after that, she was arrested for something she had done previously. She was taken back to jail and she was sentenced to prison. She sent me a letter. She said, "I have never felt so free in a jail cell because Jesus Christ is my Lord and has set me free." She told me to keep her in our church directory because she will be our missionary



"The ISRAELITES had to cross the JORDAN to the PROMISED LAND; I had to cross HEMPHILL STREET."

to those in prison. So every week, I send Jo-Ann my sermons. She shares those with the inmates near her. Jo-Ann is one of those lepers who have experienced good news and she now understands this is too good to keep to herself. She is sharing the story because she *has* a story.

I believe it is the same with each of us. The first step to sharing the gospel is figuring out, What is my story? We must decide to be honest about our own lives and our own stories. Who am I? How has God's story changed my life? Where has God through Christ brought transformation? It is going to look different for each of us.⁴ For some of us, the gospel is good news because it offers forgiveness of past mistakes, like for David. For others, the gospel offers truth. In a confusing world of many religious options, the gospel brings the truth that Jesus is the Son of God and Lord. For others, the gospel brings victory over addictive sin like Jo-Ann or a sense of purpose and meaning in a life that feels pointless. For others, it brings reconciliation and hope in a broken family. But each of us should have a story. For some of us, that is going to be dramatic transformation. For some of us who have been in the church our whole life, the transformation is gradual. But each of us should have a story of the gospel that has been good news for us.

There is an old story about a Native American tribe in Canada who had lived on their land for years and years. Some government officials came and declared that this was not their land and they needed to leave. The chief of the tribe said we have lived on this land for generations, how could this not be their land? The officials showed them a deed and explained that this gave them ownership of the land. The conflict went back and forth until finally the chief stood up and he said, "If this is

⁴For a fuller description of how the gospel can be good news to us in different ways, see John P. Bowen, *Evangelism for "Normal" People: Good News for Those Looking for a Fresh Approach* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 137-139.

your land, where are your stories?"⁵ What he meant is that if this land does belong to you, you should have some stories of living on the land and being a part of the land. I think this is a good question for the church. If we believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ and that it truly is good news, where are our stories? If your youth group believes that Jesus is the answer to the sin problem in your life and the world, where are your stories? We should have some stories of how God has brought good news in Christ to us.

Bill Hybels suggests the best way to do this is to have a "before" and an "after."⁶ We should be able to pinpoint something in our life that before Christ (or before growing deeper in Christ), I was engaged in this behavior or carried this burden, but now, after Christ (or after growing deeper in Christ), I am different. What would be your story? How would you characterize how God has changed you from before until now?

One person who had this down was the blind man in John 9. Jesus comes across a beggar who was born blind. Jesus stops, bends down, takes some mud, spits on it, and puts it on his eyes. Then Jesus tells him to go and wash in the pool of Siloam. When he does, the man can see. Good news comes into his life. Transformation occurs. No longer is he blind; he can see!

When people see that this blind beggar is walking around seeing, they start to ask what happened. The Pharisees find out too, so they decide to investigate. They don't understand how this man who was born blind could be healed, especially by a man who they thought was not from God. So they get his parents and the man to hold a hearing. They ask the parents, "Is this your son? Was he born blind?" "Yes," they say,

⁵J. Edward Chamberlain, *If This is Your Land, Where are Your Stories?: Finding Common Ground* (Toronto: A. A. Knopf, 2003), 10.

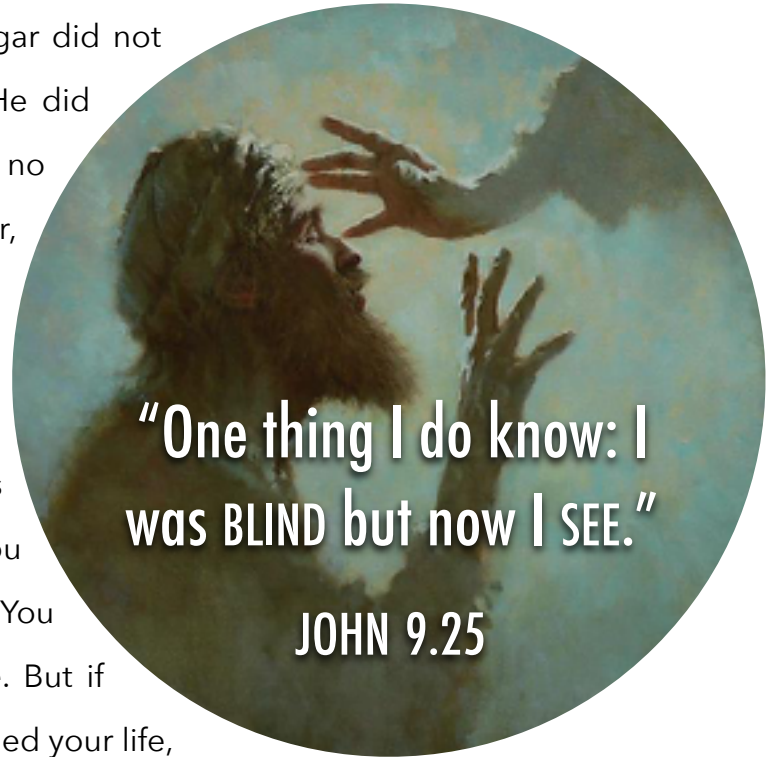
⁶Bill Hybels, *Just Walk Across the Room*, 126.

“but we don’t know how this happened.” So they turn to the man, “We know that this Jesus is a sinner. What really happened?” The man says, “Whether he is a sinner or not, I don’t know. One thing I do know. I was blind but now I see” (John 9.25).

I love this response because this beggar did not have a lot. He did not have money. He did not have prestige or status. There is no way he could stand up to the power, rhetoric, or education of the Pharisees. What he did have was a story. He had experienced the good news of Jesus. So he shared this: “Before Christ, I was blind, but after Christ, now I see.” You may not be the best disciple of Christ. You might not know a lot about the Bible. But if you have a story of how God has changed your life,

you can share the gospel. John Bowen describes sharing the gospel this way, “You do not need to be eloquent, you certainly don’t need to be aggressive, and I promise you don’t need to learn special sales techniques. All you need, at the heart of things, is a story—your story of why you think Jesus is good news.”⁷ What is your story? How has the gospel been good news to you? Because it could be that your story is actually someone else’s story.

Let me close with this story. A few years ago, there was a lady that walked into our church. I did not know it then, but she was going through a lot of problems. Life was falling apart. Marriage was bad. Family was bad. Lost her job. She was even thinking



“One thing I do know: I was BLIND but now I SEE.”

JOHN 9.25

⁷John Bowen, *Evangelism for “Normal” People: Good News for Those Looking for a Fresh Approach* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 137.

about suicide. Her dad said, "You need to find a church." She was driving down Hemphill Street and saw Southside Church of Christ. So she decided to come. She drove around the parking lot several times to get up enough courage to come inside. She walked in and I happened to greet her. I said, "Welcome to Southside! What brings you here?" She said, "I have a lot of problems and I thought I should come to church." I did not know exactly what to say (because that is not the typical first response in the church foyer). But I told her, "You are not here by accident; God brought you here." Later on, I met with her and she shared with me about the problems in her life. I told her that the first step to repairing the brokenness in her life was turning to Christ. That happens in baptism. She said that she was ready to do that. Over time, God has been putting the pieces of her life back together and it has not been easy. I asked her a year or so later about how her life was different. She said, "It is completely different. I have a completely different perspective and I have joy." I shared her story at Southside and I said, "It could be that her story is your story." You are broken and you need Christ to change your life. A lady came down the aisle during the invitation and she said, "Her story is actually my story." So she was baptized and God started rebuilding her life. I was preaching at another church and shared her story and said, "It could be that her story is your story." Someone else afterwards came up to the preacher and said, "Her story is my story." That person was baptized too.

People want to hear good news. The students in your school want to hear good news. If you share your story of how the gospel has brought good news, it could be that your story is someone else's story, and through that testimony, they might find the same good news in Jesus. We have the gospel. It is not right to keep this good news to ourselves! It is time to go back to the city and share the good news that we have experienced!



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He is passionate about exploring the wondrous design of the human body, and using his research as a platform for theological insight.

THERE'S POWER IN THE BLOOD

JUSTIN BLAND

"Washed in the blood?!" "Cleansing power of blood?!" Now, how in the *world* can blood clean?

There is something powerful about blood. Something special—even outside the context of scripture. It seems all of us have strong feelings when we talk about or see blood. It is so mysterious—sacred. Only some of that mystery will we be able to explore today. Blood has always been mysterious, and in 1615 a man named William Harvey started to introduce to the world some of the mystery about the movement of blood in the body.⁸ Until Harvey's work, we thought the arteries carried air (hence the name arteries) and that blood only went one direction, that it was completely consumed by the organs and new blood was constantly being made by the liver to replace the consumed blood. So can you even fathom the mystery blood was to those who Jesus was speaking to in John 6.55-56, "For my flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him"? What in the world is He talking about?

I feel I must be very clear here: GOD is *the* Creator. He has created everything good in its own time. GOD created us to observe and explore, to ask questions and to seek and to use logic and reason. GOD

⁸J. Martins e Silva, "From the Discovery of the Circulation of the Blood to the First Steps in Hemorheology: Part 1," *Portuguese Journal of Cardiology* 28, no. 11 (November 2009): 1245-68.

created science, thus, science is good! Science is a wonderful tool (did you hear that? it's a tool) used by imperfect people to attempt to understand GOD's creation and therefore learn about GOD Himself. Do we understand that? Science is a tool. It is *not* a god. But some will say that science disproves the existence of GOD or that science is at odds with GOD. Those who make such claims do not understand the nature of science; for something to be subject to the test of science it must be observable and repeatable. In that sense, no one can *prove* that yesterday happened (not observable or repeatable). Interestingly, science has provided us with more questions than answers. It is wrong to think that the "unknown" is getting smaller; that is completely ridiculous. In reality, we are only exposing more "unknown" as we gain knowledge.

I believe GOD has hidden truths of Himself in His creation, gems, so that when we uncover them, we gain a greater understanding of the Creator and His love for us. Remember, GOD created everything—the things we can explain and the things we cannot explain. In the book of Job, GOD asks: "who fathered the drops of dew?" Well, I know that water vapor (provided by the earth's water cycle) condenses at a certain pressure/humidity/temperature (called the dew point) to form water droplets on the grass. So, back to the question: "Who fathered the drops of dew?" What's the answer? The answer is: GOD did, same as it was then! The difference is I now know the means or the mechanism by which GOD fathered the drops of dew. The next question could be: "why is water so unique in its properties of density at various temperatures when compared to other liquids?" If you can answer that one, you should ask why again. At some point, you will come to the end of human knowledge, but GOD has created all of it. What we know *and* what we don't. GOD asked Job about His creation; I find it interesting that He did not ask a single question with regard to the peak of his design: the human body. But if He did, He could have asked about blood—"Who governs the circulation of blood? And by wisdom all the cells fed?"

GOD delights in us discovering. We are designed to discover. By discovering we can gain tools to contribute to GOD's Kingdom.

Christians: I am sick of us being lazy. It is not enough to say GOD must have done it and stop seeking. No, we must "Love the LORD your GOD with all your *mind!*" We must seek Him. Ask hard questions. Use logic and reason. By doing so we can bring Glory to GOD and be effective stewards in HIS Kingdom. As prime example, our exploration and discovery of the properties of blood has drastically changed this entire world. Can you imagine how hospitals could perform so many surgeries and save so many lives *without* blood? It was our exploration of blood that provided us the tools for successful hospitals.

Today, we will discuss the basic structure and function of blood as well as some spiritual implications. I am adapting many of the spiritual implications from Dr. Paul Brand's book *In His Image*, a book definitely worth pouring over.⁹ In addition, I will provide some of my insights I have gained about blood as well.

Blood as Life

Blood is life! Some have said it's a "River of Life."¹⁰ It has always meant life. We have only recently had an aversion, or dislike, to talking about or seeing blood. Weeks ago, I called a prominent theological scholar on wisdom and creation and asked him his thoughts on our aversion to blood in this society.¹¹ We discussed the constant search for comfort: grocery stores, temperature-controlled rooms, artificial light, working at

⁹Philip Yancey and Paul Brand, *In His Image* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010).

¹⁰Elaine N. Marieb, *Human Anatomy and Physiology* (Pearson Education New Zealand Limited, 2000).

¹¹Dave Bland and Sean Patrick Webb, *Creation, Character, and Wisdom: Rethinking the Roots of Environmental Ethics* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2016).

night, etc. In the process of seeking comfort we have separated ourselves from GOD's Creation and in so doing we have lost our appreciation for, and our understanding of, blood being life.

After the flood, GOD allows humans to eat animals, apparently for the first time. Listen to what GOD says in Genesis 9.3ff:

Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you. And as I gave you the green plants, I give you everything. But you shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood. And for your lifeblood I will require a reckoning: from every beast I will require it and from man. From his fellow man I will require a reckoning for the life of man.

They were *not* to consume the blood; it is sacred, it is the animal's *life* and *all life* belongs to GOD. He further lays down the law, very much in the literal sense, several times in Leviticus 17. Here is one example from Leviticus 17.14:

For the life of every creature is its blood: its blood is its life. Therefore I have said to the people of Israel, You shall not eat the blood of any creature, for the life of every creature is its blood. Whoever eats it shall be cut off.

When is the last time you saw a large animal butchered? You see, in our society today, we have little meaningful connection to blood.

The Structure and Function of Blood

Functionally, we know that blood is a complex, and relatively thick, fluid. It is a myriad of various substances performing a multitude of tasks. In fact, the dynamic, interactive, and complex properties of various cells and substances in the blood actually mean it functions more like an organ—your liver, heart, lungs, kidneys are all

organs. In fact, many scientists consider blood to be its own organ.¹² Let us move forward thinking about blood as an organ.

If we were to separate blood out into its various parts almost half of it would be a relatively clear pale yellow fluid called plasma. The other half would be red and between these two would be a yellowish line (see Figure 1). The red part of the fluid is what we are most familiar with: erythrocytes or Red Blood Cells (RBCs). The yellow line is a buffy coat, which is made up of leukocytes or white blood cells (WBCs), as well as thrombocytes or platelets. In many cases, the buffy coat and red part are grouped together and called Formed Elements.

So we have Blood Plasma and Formed Elements.

Red Blood Cells have some wonderful and unique properties. They are formed in bone marrow, and unlike most other cells, they do not have a nucleus. If you remember, nuclei are what make cell replication possible. So since RBCs do not have a nucleus, they cannot replicate, so their survival is limited to about 120 days¹³ and are needing to be replaced at a rate equal to their destruction.¹⁴ In fact, they are being replaced at a

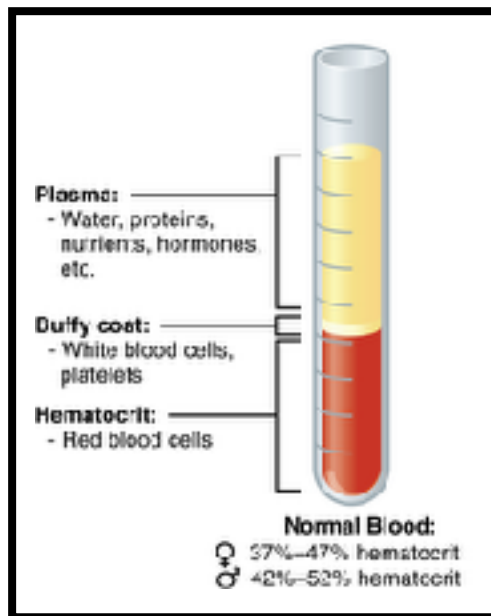


FIGURE 1

¹²Lance L. Munn and Michael M Dupin, "Blood Cell Interactions and Segregation in Flow," *Annals of Biomedical Engineering* 36, no. 4 (January 11, 2008): 534-44.

¹³Djuna Z. de Back et al., "Of Macrophages and Red Blood Cells; a Complex Love Story," *Frontiers in Physiology* 5 (2014): 9.

¹⁴This need for replacement occurs in order to maintain homeostasis, or balance. See Justin Bland, "Keeping Our Balance: Spiritual Lessons From Biomechanics," in *Balance: 2015 Deeper Youth Conference*, ed. Luke Dockery and Jake Greer (Fayetteville, AR: Deeper Youth Ministry, 2015), 30-48.

rate of about 2-3 million RBCs per SECOND!¹⁵ RBCs also are small, but since they are many times larger than some of the capillaries they need to go through, they must deform as they squeeze through the tiny spaces of a capillary. This is no accident! By having to squeeze through a hole 1/4 its size (or less) the RBC is able to exchange far more oxygen (O₂) and carbon dioxide (CO₂) than it otherwise would (see Figure 2). This deformation is made possible

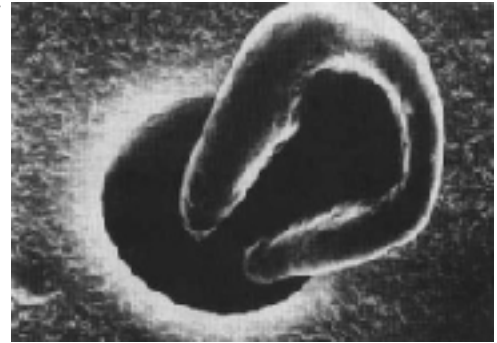


FIGURE 2

because of the humbling design of the structure of the RBC¹⁶—in particular, the absence of a nucleus!

Generally, when individuals think of RBCs they think of carrying oxygen, and this is true. RBCs have a wonderful property to carry oxygen molecules inside a structure called hemoglobin. Hemoglobin can bind four oxygen molecules in an astounding way by changing its structure based on how many O₂ molecules are bound to it. Once an O₂ molecule binds, the whole structure changes such that it grips more tightly the bound O₂ molecule and opens up another site where another O₂ molecule can bind more easily. This is done until four O₂ molecules are bound to a single hemoglobin molecule so that O₂ molecules are held tightly until the demand for O₂ exceeds the strength of the bond. Then, one by one, each O₂ molecule is released in reverse order. There are approximately 250 million hemoglobin molecules in a single RBC, so that means around 1 billion O₂ atoms are bound to a single RBC. This property is truly astounding—more than we can discuss here. To the cell (and, by extension, the body), oxygen equals life. Blood carries oxygen, blood carries life. This

¹⁵P. Astrand et al., *Textbook of Work Physiology*, vol. 4 (Champaign, Illinois: Human Kinetics, 2003).

¹⁶Monica Diez-Silva et al., "Shape and Biomechanical Characteristics of Human Red Blood Cells in Health and Disease," *MRS Bulletin* 35, no. 5 (May 2010): 382-88.

is not new to you—you know you need oxygen, but you also need to breathe out CO₂. As you know, blood is the means by which CO₂ is removed from tissue. What I find fascinating is that it is *not* the demand for oxygen that makes us want to breathe, but the rise in CO₂ levels that make us want to breathe. You know that feeling you get when your brother or “good friend” holds you under the water for just a little too long? You turn into some crazed lunatic and toss them asunder as if they were a twig. And you gasp for air as if you have never felt it before? What drove you to do that? Interestingly, not the demand for oxygen, but the overpowering stimulus of elevated CO₂ levels. Too much CO₂ can cause serious problems and even death. For you to have life, your blood must not only deliver the substances that sustain life, but also it must remove the substances that destroy life.

Life is more than just oxygen; it requires fuel too. And here I want to highlight some interesting properties of Blood Plasma.

Blood plasma (the clear-ish fluid at the top part of the vial in Figure 3) is mostly water, but it is vitally important. You see, besides having unique properties important to bodily function, plasma also provides the means by which the other stuff in the blood can be transported throughout the body. Can you imagine if your blood had no water in it? What would your blood look like? How would it behave in your body? Think of a thick milkshake: how easily would milkshake blood (that sounds absolutely disgusting) travel through your blood vessels? When we talk about the thickness of blood we are referring to blood’s viscosity. The viscosity of blood is critical to your body function. You know you need water to survive and besides the fact that every single cell in your entire body requires water to function, another reason is to maintain the appropriate viscosity of your blood:



the heart cannot pump milkshake blood with much efficiency. Just because **FIGURE 3** water is prevalent in our world and *appears* simple does *not* mean that it actually is

simple or that it is unimportant. Do you hear what I am saying? Do not make the mistake of judging the importance of something or someone based on its appearance; they may have a special task you know *nothing* about!

Besides water, blood plasma is made up of proteins (appropriately called plasma proteins), which have a myriad of purposes and functions. One main function I want to point out is the transportation of fuel all over the body. Have you noticed what happens when you pour oil in water? What happens? The oil floats! Oil is a lipid or fat in liquid form. We have in our body a significant source of wonderful fuel called fat. I do not have time to tell you how great this is or to try to combat the bad name that fat has in our society, just trust me: fat has some incredible, critical, life-sustaining functions. Fat is transported in our blood from our fat storage cells (called adipocytes) to the cells that need energy in the form of free fatty acids, but if fat was just placed into the blood stream it would literally float! Where do you think it would float? Well, when we are standing or sitting it would float to your brain! And then we wouldn't be able to think and we would die. But, thankfully, the most abundant plasma protein (albumin) escorts or carries fat in the blood throughout the entire system. Thanks to albumin, you are not dead. Blood plasma also transports sugar or glucose throughout the body.

Glucose is critical to cell function; in fact, your brain primarily uses glucose as its fuel. Many scientists would say that the brain cannot use anything but glucose to work (I disagree, though¹⁷). Not only the brain, but other tissues prefer glucose for function. At high-intensity exercise, glucose stored in the muscle and blood is used to produce a significant amount of energy very rapidly. Think of it as gasoline. There are other forms of energy to burn in a campfire—wood for example—but you will see a much

¹⁷Thomas C. Glenn et al., "Lactate: Brain Fuel in Human Traumatic Brain Injury: a Comparison with Normal Healthy Control Subjects.," *Journal of Neurotrauma* 32, no. 11 (June 1, 2015): 820-32, doi:10.1089/neu.2014.3483.

more rapid transformation of energy if you pour gasoline on a fire; however, it is not a sustainable means to keep your campfire going. Similarly, there are other forms of energy in the body: glucose transforms energy rapidly, but runs out quick. Also... don't pour gasoline on a fire.

Blood glucose is fascinating to me. I think of it as a fuel gauge, which constantly informs the whole body of the current fuel status. There really is not much glucose in the blood, but it is so critical to brain function that the body will keep a very close watch on how much glucose is available. The moment blood glucose begins to drop, then we have a whole body response in an attempt to elevate blood glucose. The moment blood glucose gets too high, we have a whole body response to store blood glucose. This cycle is constantly happening in your body attempting to maintain the appropriate amount of blood glucose while at the same time ready to adapt to the ever-changing needs of the environment. In this way, effectively all tissue is able to contribute to the balance of glucose in the blood. If glucose is too high, all tissue can store glucose. If glucose is too low, all tissue can release glucose into the blood.

By transporting fuel to every cell throughout the body, blood provides life to cells and is the sustainer of life. Blood sustains life. Blood has always represented life.

So the body uses blood to transport fuel—fats and glucose—to other tissues, but it also transports other substances, such as hormones. Hormones are a signaling system the body uses to communicate to all the other tissues in the body. Hormones signal cells to alter their function based on the design of the hormone and receptor. For example, Growth Hormone, tells or signals cells to, well, grow (it's very appropriately named). Another familiar example is Adrenaline (we call it epinephrine), which tells the body's cells to prepare for hard work by increasing metabolism, increasing strength, increasing heart rate, and much more. The hormone Melatonin tells every cell that it is time to sleep, recover, and repair. Insulin instructs cells to take in blood glucose and

A microscopic image showing a dense field of red blood cells, appearing as bright red, biconcave discs against a lighter background. The cells are packed together, with some showing their characteristic shape and color.

**Blood is LIFE. Blood MEDIATES, COMMUNICATES,
CONNECTS. Blood removes BURDENS.**

—JUSTIN BLAND—

prepare for work. We could go on and on. The hormones, which fit into specific receptors on cell membranes, allow direct communication for cellular function, in some cases altering the very identity of the cell. The end goal of this hormonal communication system is to allow the body to appropriately meet the demands of the environment. If this system were not in place, there would be no way for cells to be able to respond to the needs of the environment. It is this communication that allows the body to be functional.

These hormones can be found in blood plasma circulating through the entire body using all 60,000 to 100,000 miles¹⁸ of capillary network in order to communicate with every cell. Blood provides the means by which every cell in the body is connected to every other cell. Blood **mediates, communicates** and **connects** every organ, every tissue, and every cell to all the others. Effectively, the body as a whole is able to function and remains connected because of the blood.

Blood is life. Blood mediates, communicates, connects. Blood removes burdens.

Blood removes burdens? I know it's a strange thing to say, but let's perform a mental

¹⁸ W. C. Aird, "Spatial and Temporal Dynamics of the Endothelium," *Journal of Thrombosis and Haemostasis* 3, no. 7 (July 2005): 1392-1406.

exercise: imagine you are running. What do you feel? What is your heart doing? What are your lungs doing? What about that wet stuff on your forehead? What is going on? So to run you must move your legs, the muscles contracting require energy and some of that energy is given off as heat. Your muscles heat up, which is a good because muscles function much better when their temperature is slightly elevated (but too much heat is damaging). But the damage is better described as a burden. Excessive heat in your muscles is a burden for the metabolic systems, the contractile properties of the muscle and, eventually, a burden for your system as a whole. In short, you produce less energy and your muscles lose strength. Enter your blood, literally. Your blood does two amazing things in this scenario and the first you have already concluded—it acts like a radiator. Blood picks up the heat, the burden, from your muscles and, because of the amazingly high heat capacity of water in your blood plasma, it carries the heat to the rest of your body. Specifically, to parts of your body most exposed to the surface: your skin. And here is the second amazing property: your sweat is a filtrate of blood plasma! We remove approximately 80% of the heat burden through the evaporation of sweat, and sweat is from your blood. It is a filtrate of blood plasma!

But blood doesn't just remove heat burden; another aspect of this concept is the buffering capacity of blood. The extensive buffering capacity of blood is a protective mechanism removing the chemical burden of your muscles. When performing a good deal of work, muscles use fuel, and as a result produce by-products (some will mistakenly call these products "waste products", but our body does waste much of anything). Of the by-products that working muscles produce, one of the most well known is Lactic Acid (This is not the time or place to defend the honor of Lactic Acid—that war is waged elsewhere, but I daily take it upon myself to battle ignorance and defend the cause of the molecules that cannot defend themselves). Lactic Acid is a

beautiful metabolic intermediate and should not be regarded as a waste product. It does not cause muscle soreness and it does not cause fatigue! How dare you accuse it of such things! It actually *prevents* fatigue. There is a speck of truth to the nasty claims—Lactic Acid *is* an acid, it *does* lower muscle and blood pH, and there *can* be some disruption of muscle function as a result. However, blood has the wonderful capacity to buffer, or combat, acid accumulation. Our bodies function best within a very tight range of pH; above or below that range we lose function quickly. We must have the capacity to maintain appropriate pH, and blood buffers acidity with elegance.

Furthermore, the blood transports metabolic by-products, dysfunctional cells, cell parts, worn-out enzymes, broken proteins, undesirable cellular products, etc to the liver and kidneys to be scrubbed clean. Thus, a constant cleaning is occurring at the microscopic level. Every cell bathed in blood is cleansed. The cleansing power of blood can be easily demonstrated—pump up a blood pressure cuff around your arm until circulation to your hand is cut off then simply contract and relax your fingers for several moments. *Very* soon you will become uncomfortable, then you will rapidly begin to experience pain, and soon this pain will become unbearable. The pain is a result of the cells screaming to be cleansed. Yes, they need oxygen, but the pain is brought on by a multitude of factors, primarily the metabolic by-products that are produced which need to be cleared—or cleansed, if you will—by blood. When you release the pressure on the cuff, different people express different descriptions of the sensation, but all are relieved to have blood return to their fingers. You have just experienced the physiological cleansing power of your blood.

Thus far we have learned that blood is life, blood mediates and communicates, blood removes burdens, blood cleanses, but there is another major function of blood we should be interested in: the immune function. We must think of our immune system as a strategic military force. Seriously, it is a mind-bendingly complex military force

with multiple layers of tactics and an impressive array of weapons.¹⁹ We even have fighting for us a group of warrior cells called “Natural Killer Cells!” Essentially they are the Marines of our blood. Our immune system is constantly on patrol in our blood to protect against invaders or pathogens. These pathogens could be bacteria, viruses or other substances that are not identified to be “us,” or in other words, identified as “non-self.” Our immune system has two classifications: non-specific and specific. Non-specific immunity comprises the first and second line of defenses. An example of the first line of defense would be the skin. An example of the second line of defense would be a general inflammatory response to damaged cells—this process takes place in the blood and it is the communication properties (we spoke of earlier), which allow for the second line of defense to be effective. The other classification, specific immunity, has three characteristics to do battle with pathogens: it can focus in on a specific pathogen, it involves the entire system, and it remembers each confrontation forever.²⁰ When a pathogen encounters the blood, the immune system is challenged causing a chain reaction. Blood flow to the area increases, bringing to the site protein-rich fluid, nutrients, and a host of pathogen-fighting cells each with a different skill set to identify, attack, kill, break down, and clean up the pathogen and other damaged cells. Special cells called T and B lymphocytes gain their maturity when exposed to an immune challenge. Then, something amazing happens: certain B-cells, aptly named memory B-cells, are designed to remember the specific pathogen *for the rest of your life*.²¹ It is precisely because of the challenge that you are immune to diseases you have survived, to challenges you have overcome. The next time that specific

¹⁹W. C. Aird, “Spatial and Temporal Dynamics of the Endothelium,” *Journal of Thrombosis and Haemostasis* 3, no. 7 (July 2005): 1392-1406.

²⁰Marieb, *Human Anatomy, and Physiology*.

²¹Martin J. Spiering, “Primer on the Immune System,” *Alcohol Research: Current Reviews* 37, no. 2 (2015): 171-75.

pathogen enters your blood stream, it doesn't have a chance. It is rapidly identified and creatively destroyed. It could be eaten and digested by macrophages, T-cells could punch holes in it, it could be blown up by self-destructing cells, or a host of other variants from that list. **It is because your blood has overcome a challenge that it has become stronger.** The bigger the challenge, the stronger your immune system becomes. In some cases, though, the challenge is too big for the person. This was prevalent early on in modern medicine, especially in rural areas.

The Blood of the Overcomer

Dr. Paul Brand tells a story of his daughter becoming deathly sick with the measles in the mid-1950s in rural India. Her blood was doing the best it could, but it was not enough. She needed help. She needed a way to identify the pathogen and mount an immune response to destroy the infection. She needed the blood of someone who had conquered the disease. She needed the "blood of an overcomer." They found someone and transfused serum from his blood to the daughter. With the boosted immune system, because of the blood of the overcomer, the disease was destroyed and she was saved from death.



DR. PAUL BRAND

There is power in the blood.

"Whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood..."

Do you remember Matthew 26.26-28?

Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, "Take, eat; this is my body." And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying,

"Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins."

If you are a Christian you are transfused with the blood of Christ—the blood of the Overcomer. He has overcome the greatest challenge, the deadliest pathogen: sin. His blood is **life**, His blood **cleanses**, His blood removes our **burdens**. Through His blood we have a Mediator, and by His blood, we can commune with The Almighty GOD. His Blood can overcome all: "In this world you will have trouble, but take heart, I have **overcome** the world (John 16.33)"

"What can wash away my sins? Nothing but The Blood of Jesus.

What can make me whole again? Nothing but the Blood of Jesus.

Oh, precious is the flow that makes me white as snow.

No other fount I know. Nothing but the Blood of Jesus."

That is **Good** News.



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He and his wife Linnea have a new baby boy, Peter, and a dog, Gibson.

Kevin is a graduate of Harding University and Harding School of Theology. His passion for ministry is to equip Christian young men and women to live their faith genuinely and to discuss their faith intelligently.

THE GOSPEL AND THE GOSPELS

KEVIN BURR

About two years ago in July, my wife Linnea and I had just gotten home from a nice vacation out west to Yellowstone National Park. We were sitting on the couch, tired, when all of a sudden I said, "Let's go to the animal shelter and get a puppy." She looked at me and said "What?!? We can't do that." I responded back "Sure we can. It'll be fine." She pushed back again, "We can't keep a dog here in our apartment." I reminded her because we were in the process of moving we were often gone on the weekends, and we were house-sitting for some friends so the dog would hardly be in our apartment. She finally said "Look, I don't want to go and find a dog we fall in love with and not be able to bring him home." I promised her it would be okay, and so finally she agreed to go.

When we got there, we went to the back where the kennels are and started looking at the dogs. About two months before this we had looked online to see what dogs they had available. We were looking for a bigger breed puppy—we weren't really looking for a small dog. So I had about three or four in mind when we went back to the kennels. We saw the first two and they were fine; there wasn't anything wrong with them, but they just didn't seem that excited to see us. As we kept walking we turned the corner, and there he was. This 22-pound black and white pointer mix was jumping up and down, sniffing and licking at us, whining to see us. This dog wasn't just

wagging his tail—he was shaking his whole body he was so happy to see us. I was thinking to myself “Man, this dog is really hyper.” My wife immediately knelt down to pet him and he licked both of her hands all over. I was a little more cautious since we’d never met this dog before, but when I knelt down he did the same thing to me. For Linnea, that settled it. This was the dog for her. I still wanted to see the other dogs we saw online, but Linnea was convinced this one was the one for us. She reluctantly went with me to look at the others, but they weren't excited to see us either.

So we went our front and asked to see Pierre—that was the name our dog had been given by his previous owners. When they brought him out, we went to this room off to the side to play with him. It was in that room I realized just how hyper he was. He was running around chasing a ball and had this rope toy that left bruises on our legs! I saw this crazy thing and thought, “My goodness this isn't a dog, it’s a dog-shaped tornado!” I just wasn't sure I could handle such a crazy dog.

After we took him back to the front I told them we were ready to start the paperwork to begin his adoption. One of the managers was out there and saw him with us and said “Oh, that’s Pierre. We haven’t had him long here.” I said, “Yeah I noticed there wasn’t much info about him on y’all’s website.” Then she told us this, “Well, he came here under unusual circumstances.” I started wondering if he was sick or something. She went on, “Animal control had to bring him here. It turns out his previous owners were preparing him for dog fighting. They would leave him out in the cold. They were abusive and mistreated him. And they even pulled each and every one of his whiskers with pliers.” I felt sick to my stomach. How could anyone do something like that?

It was at that moment I knew this was the dog for us. In this moment we had an opportunity to take one of God’s creatures out of an awful, horrible situation and bring him into something new. We had an opportunity to buy him out of this evil and

give him a new name, a new family, a new home, and a life. We had the opportunity to redeem him from this darkness and welcome him into a new and wonderful life.

You see, sin does this to us—it takes us prisoner, either by our own choices or by someone else's, and we need someone else to redeem us out of it.



Gibson (formerly "Pierre") with his new family, after he had been redeemed from his previous life.

Why Do We Need The Gospel?

To understand the Gospel and why we need "good news" in the first place, we need to understand a few things about sin. First, what is sin?

We could define sin in a number of different ways, but one of the easiest ways to describe it is when we corrupt what is good.²² After God made humans in Genesis chapter 1, He said it was "very good"—everything before the creation of humans is "good," but after humans are made God says it is "very good" (Genesis 1.26-31).

²²H. A. G. Blocher, "Sin," *New Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2000), 783-84.

Genesis 1–3 describes God’s relationship with creation and humans—God wanted to be with humans and to be in relationship with humans. But sin destroys that relationship. When we sin, we are taking the good things God has made, whether it’s our bodies or our free will, and using them in such a way that corrupts and ruins God’s good creation. Anytime when we do not follow what God asks us to do, we sin.²³ For example, God says in both the Old Testament and the New Testament that we should not steal or lie or treat people wrongly in any way. When we do those things, we sin.

When we sin, basically we are choosing to reject God’s way of living in favor of our own way of living. That means that sin is more than just an accident or a mistake. Sin isn’t like a paper cut that hurts for a little but goes away after a while. Sin is more like cancer that will only continue to spread unless you take serious measures to stop it. We know what this is like—how many of us have ever tried to stop doing something or said “I’ll never do that again,” but we end up doing it later anyway?

An easy way to remember how sin affects people is this acronym: P. E. S. T.²⁴

- P = Personal
- E = Ecological
- S = Social
- T = Theological

Sin affects us **personally**—because of sin death entered the world (Romans 5.12). When sin entered the world it brought sickness and death with it. Genesis 3.19 tells us how our own bodies will be affected by sin. Sin also affects the world itself (**ecological**). Looking again at Genesis 3, in verses 17-19 God tells Adam and Eve how the very earth

²³Ibid., 781-88, at 783.

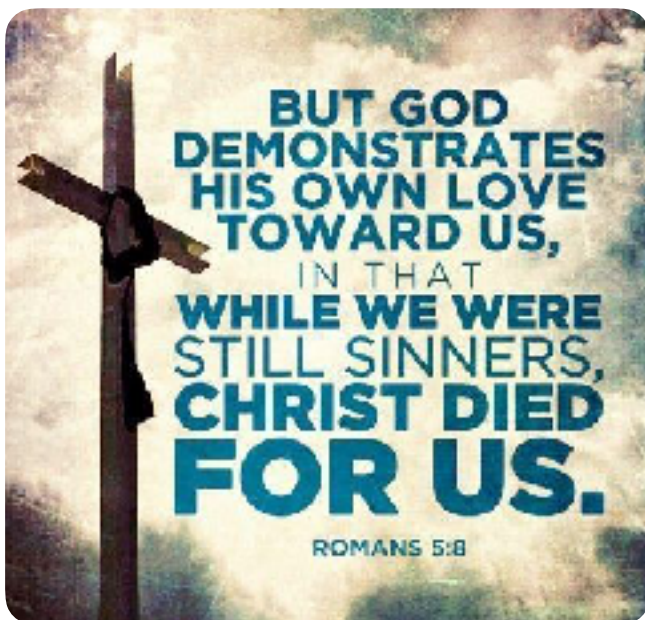
²⁴I first heard this presented in a Systematic Theology class by Dr. Mark Powell, Professor of Theology at Harding School of Theology in Memphis, TN.

itself will be affected by sin's presence. Relationships are damaged, too **(social)**. In the second half of Genesis 3.16, God says that Eve's relationship with Adam will be frustrating and difficult at times. Finally, our sin separates us from God **(theological)**.

In Romans 3.23, the apostle Paul summarizes the situation we find ourselves in. He says, "... all have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God." Because of our sin, we have rejected God's goodness and love, and nothing we do can restore our standing with God—we cannot fix this.

We've Sinned, So Now What?

So now that we understand what sin is and how it affects us, we need to ask, "How can this be fixed? Is it even possible for this to be fixed?" The answer is "Yes!" Paul also says in Romans that "God demonstrates His love for us, that while we were still sinners Christ died for us" (Romans 5.8). This is basically what the Gospel is about: all of humanity was separated from God because of our sin. Because sin is so serious it



needed to be dealt with, so God needed to fix the problems sin created among humans and in the world. Human sin corrupted us and creation, so we deserved to be separated from God by death. But Because God loves humans He did not want us to be separated from Him; because God is good He had to deal with sin, but because He loves us so much He did not want us to be eternally separated from Him. So, God sent

Jesus—who was willing to come to Earth—and through Jesus, God defeated the power that sin had over humans and the world.

This means that Jesus plays the *decisive role* in bringing humans back together with God. Paul says in Romans 1.16 that the Gospel “is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith.” The word “Gospel” means “good news”, and so the Gospel—the good news of Jesus Christ—is that God has now made it possible for us to be brought back into a good relationship with Him. This is what Paul means when he says “God has reconciled us to Himself through Christ” (2 Corinthians 5.18). Reconciliation means to fix a broken relationship. Sometimes we hear about a husband and wife who split up but later reconcile—that means they have made peace and their relationship that was once broken has been restored. The Gospel—the good news about what God has done for us in Jesus Christ—is about reconciliation with God and at the same time it is about saving us from the sin, and corruption, and death that plague our lives and our world.

How Does Jesus Fit Into All of This?

So how does all this work? How does God actually save us and what does this have to do with Jesus?

Let’s review: we have all sinned, rejected God, and corrupted creation by our sin, and so death entered the world. God is a **righteous** judge which means there must be some punishment for sin—death, eternal separation from God. But God is also **merciful**, and so we do not pay the ultimate price. Instead, God has made a way for someone else to pay that price for us, and that person is Jesus. Jesus was tempted like we are but did not sin (Hebrews 4.15) and so He lived a perfect, sinless life. Jesus did not deserve to die, but for our sake God placed our sin on Jesus, who willingly took it upon Himself. Jesus freely offered His life in our place so we could be reconciled to God. The books of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all show how Jesus

gave up His life, died by crucifixion, and was buried later that day. The price of our sins had been taken up by Jesus, and He paid for them with His life.

But death did not have the final word. Because Jesus was sinless and had not rebelled or rejected God but lived His life perfectly in sync with how God wants humans to live, He did not deserve death. On this basis, because Jesus was perfectly righteous, God **vindicated** Jesus—God declared that Jesus was righteous and therefore He would not stay dead. So God raised Jesus back to life.

This is the basic story of why Jesus came to the world: sin separated us from God, “but God loved the world and sent his only Son, so that whoever believes in Him will not perish but will have everlasting life” (John 3.16). This is the Gospel, the good news for us: we do not have to be separated from God forever because Jesus paid the price we owed. The apostle Paul explains how we participate in Jesus’ death and resurrection in Romans 6.3-11:

Don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death in order that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.

For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly also be united with him in a resurrection like his. For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body ruled by sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin—because anyone who has died has been set free from sin. Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him. For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.

In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus.

The good news of the Gospel is that Jesus has made a way for us to be reconciled to God. Paul describes baptism in metaphorical terms saying that when we are baptized, we “die” in a certain sense. Paul compares being taken under the water during baptism with Jesus’ death and burial. And just as we are brought up out of the water during baptism, Jesus was brought up out of death. Paul says that if anyone dies sin no longer has any effect on that person (from Romans 6.7 above), which is why it is necessary for us to “die” in the sense that we are baptized “into his death” (from Romans 6.3 above). If we “die” with Jesus like this we will live eternally with Jesus too.

Paul puts it a little differently in Ephesians 2.4-6. He says,

But God, who is rich in mercy, from the great love with which he loved us even when we were dead because of our sins, made us alive together with Christ—by grace you have been saved—and raised us up with him and seated us with him in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus

The good news of the Gospel gets better and better!

Don’t Forget About the Holy Spirit

The apostle Peter preaches the first sermon in the book of Acts. When he finishes, the people in the audience are immediately convicted of their sinfulness, and they ask Peter what they should do. Peter responds,

Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. For the promise is for you, for your children, and for all who are far away, everyone whom the Lord our God calls to him.

(Acts 2.38-39)

What Peter says in these verses is an absolutely essential part of the Gospel. After we are baptized we receive the Holy Spirit, God’s very own Spirit, who lives within us. In 1 Corinthians 6 and Romans 8 Paul describes how the Holy Spirit lives in us. In Galatians

5.22, Paul says, "... the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." These are the characteristics and attributes that we begin to have as the Holy Spirit works in us and in our lives to make us more like Jesus.

What Good News is There When Christians Die?

Finally, if we have been buried with Christ in baptism and the Holy Spirit in us has been creating us to be more and more like Jesus, then after we die we will eventually be raised up to new life with Jesus when He returns. Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 4.13-14:

But we do not want you to be uninformed, brothers and sisters, about those who have died, so that you may not grieve as others do who have no hope. For since we believe that Jesus died and rose again, even so, through Jesus, God will bring with him those who have died.

Paul means that even though we die now, we will not stay dead but we will have new life when Jesus comes again.

So What Are "the Gospels"?

In the New Testament we see a few different kinds of writing. Romans and Ephesians, for example, are letters that Paul wrote to Christians in the cities of Rome and Ephesus. These are actual letters that Paul had a friend carry to these congregations in these cities. The other letters are like this too. The book of Revelation at the end of the New Testament is called an "apocalypse." The term apocalypse means "revelation," something that was hidden at one time but has been revealed. Apocalypses use fantastic imagery and symbols to convey meanings to only certain groups of people, usually for group insiders who would know how to understand the complex imagery and symbolism; we may find Revelation difficult to understand today, but the early Christians John was writing to would have understood it just fine. Another kind of

writing we find in the New Testament are the four gospels we have been talking about. The gospels are forms of ancient biographies,²⁵ which are different from biographies today. Ancient biographies intended to portray real events and the real words of actual people from history, just like modern biographies. But unlike modern biographies, ancient biographies felt free to arrange their material according to theme or topic and did not always have to be chronologically precise. This helps explain why certain events in one gospel account appear before other events in another gospel account. We can see an example of this when we compare the temptation of Jesus in Matthew 4 and in Luke 4. These authors depict Jesus' temptation in the following order:

Matthew	Luke
1. Turn stones to bread	1. Turn stones to bread
2. Jump off the temple	2. Worship Satan on the mountain
3. Worship Satan on the mountain	3. Jump off the temple

Matthew regularly portrays Jesus doing important things on mountains: Jesus teaches on mountains, he spends time on mountains praying, and he and a few disciples had a special revelation from God on a mountaintop. The Gospel According to Matthew even ends on a mountain. So it makes sense for Matthew to end his account of Jesus' temptation on a mountain. Luke, on the other hand, ends his gospel with the disciples awaiting Jesus in Jerusalem (where the temple was) and so he hints at the importance of Jerusalem by placing it at the end of his account of the temptation. The bottom line is this: the authors of the gospels were following the conventions of biography writing

²⁵Richard A. Burridge, "Gospel: Genre," *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., 2013, pp. 335-42. This author has made the most compelling case for arguing the gospels are ancient biographies. The consensus among specialists in the New Testament today is that the gospels are biographies.

of their day and age, and a comparison with other types of biographies shows this to be true.²⁶

The first four books of the New Testament are Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. We commonly refer to these books of the New Testament as “the gospels.” Their full titles are “The Gospel According to Matthew,” “The Gospel According to Mark,” etc. We have just described what “the Gospel” is above, so the first four books of the New Testament are each author’s own presentation of the Gospel about Jesus. Just like how God gives each of us different gifts, God inspired each of the evangelists—the authors of the gospels—in different ways to write the story of Jesus’ life to emphasize different things about Jesus: what He said or did and who He was.



The Gospel According to Mark

In the order of the New Testament, Mark’s gospel account is second, but it is likely that Matthew and Luke both knew about Mark’s gospel and followed his account as

²⁶Richard A. Burridge, *What Are the Gospels?: A Comparison with Graeco-Roman Biography*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

they put together their own accounts. Again, to anyone wanting to write a biography in the first century, this was a perfectly acceptable practice, even for an eyewitness like Matthew. It makes sense, then, for us to begin with the Gospel According to Mark.

Mark starts off his gospel saying “The beginning of the *good news* of Jesus Christ, the Son of God” (Mark 1.1). The next several chapters show Jesus teaching some, but they mainly describe what Jesus *does*: he cures diseases, he casts out demons, he feeds thousands of people, and restores sight to the blind. Jesus does some teaching in the first half of the book, but Mark’s primary concern is to show that Jesus is the Messiah, God’s Son. Jesus demonstrates this by the many miracles he performs. In Mark 8.27, Jesus asks his disciples who the crowds think Jesus is. He then asks who the disciples think He is. Peter responds “You are the Messiah” (Mark 8.29). Mark then tells us that after that time Jesus began to teach the disciples that He would eventually suffer and die, but that on the third day, he would rise again (Mark 8.31). Throughout the second half of the book, Jesus still performs miracles, but Mark shows Him doing much more teaching about the **kingdom of God**. In Mark, when Jesus describes the kingdom of God, he means when God will begin to rule again on earth. Jesus’ ministry and miracles show that God’s rule is now breaking into the world in a way that it has not done before. That’s why Jesus begins his ministry saying “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news” (Mark 1.15).

The Gospel According to Matthew

The Gospel According to Matthew is Matthew’s own unique presentation of Jesus. Matthew was one of Jesus’ disciples, and so he had a front row seat to much of Jesus’s ministry. Matthew doesn’t begin his account like Mark. Matthew shows the importance of Jesus’ ancestry by placing a long genealogy at the beginning of his

gospel; Jesus is not just anybody, he is the rightful heir to Israel's throne because he is a direct descendant of King David. The beginning of Matthew's gospel is also significant because there are some striking similarities with events surrounding Jesus' birth and Moses' birth: the king was trying to kill Jewish boys, the parents of a certain boy found a way to protect their child, and the land of Egypt features in each story.

Matthew 4.17 says, "From that time Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'" What Mark (and Luke) call "the kingdom of God," Matthew almost always refers to as "the kingdom of heaven." This is probably a way to show respect towards God by not referring directly to Him in order to avoid taking His name in vain (one of the Ten Commandments). Jesus begins healing the sick and casting out demons in Matthew 4. But something changes beginning in Matthew 5. Suddenly Jesus stops and begins to talk at length about what life in the kingdom of heaven is like. He goes on for three whole chapters nonstop, then begins healing the sick and casting out demons again. This pattern of miracles and teaching, teaching and miracles continues throughout the entire gospel of Matthew.

It is obvious that Matthew wants to show his readers that Jesus was empowered by God to perform miracles of healing, casting out demons, feeding multitudes, and calming terrifying thunderstorms. But it is even more obvious that Matthew wants to present Jesus as a master teacher. We mentioned earlier how mountains are important in Matthew's gospel. Matthew shows that Jesus was frequently teaching or having other experiences of God on mountaintops. Who else in Israel's history experienced God on a mountaintop and taught God's people what God wanted them to do? Moses! Moses was known as Israel's law giver, and Moses witnessed God on Mount Sinai unlike any other Israelite ever had or would after him (Exodus 34.1-29). In a similar but much more important way, Jesus is the new law-giver for God's people, who also had an incredible experience of God on a mountaintop (Matthew 17.1-8).

Moses also directed the people through the Passover, where God's people, the Israelites, sacrificed lambs and covered their doorposts with the blood of the lambs so God would pass over them when He sent the last plague on Egypt. In a similar but much more important way, the blood of Jesus, the Lamb of God, delivers God's people and directs God's people to salvation. In Matthew, then, Jesus is the new and better Moses figure.

The Gospel According to Luke

Luke's gospel account is very similar to Matthew's—Luke emphasizes what Jesus did and who Jesus was. Luke greatly emphasizes how the Holy Spirit empowers Jesus' ministry. He says:

Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country.... [Jesus said] "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

(Luke 4.14, 18)

The Holy Spirit was even active before Jesus was born, preparing people like Mary and Elizabeth and his cousin John the Baptist. Later on Jesus reminds the disciples that the Holy Spirit will be with them when they are challenged for their faith (Luke 12.12). The second volume of Luke's gospel is The Acts of the Apostles, and the role of the Holy Spirit in empowering the early church is even more prevalent in Acts.

Another important aspect that is unique to Luke's gospel is how often we see Jesus praying. In Matthew's and Mark's gospels Jesus talks quite a bit about prayer (for example, read Matthew 6.5-13), but we rarely see Him actually praying. John's gospel never even mentions the word "prayer," but we know Jesus prayed, because in John 17 it

says “After Jesus had spoken these words, he looked up to heaven and said” (John 17.1), which is obviously a prayer. But Luke’s gospel has more references to Jesus praying than the other three gospels combined. This is a great example of what we talked about earlier –each evangelist was able to present Jesus with certain emphases that were both different from another author’s gospel but had many of the same similarities.

The Gospel According to John

Matthew and Luke both start with Jesus’ birth, and Mark begins with John the Baptist who prepared the way for Jesus’ ministry. But the beginning of the Gospel According to John is fascinating because it starts off at neither of these places. Instead, John begins with Jesus as He existed before He was born as a child, or another way to put it, John’s gospel begins with the **pre-incarnate Christ**. “Incarnate” means “in the body,” and so John begins by talking about what Jesus was like before He was born as a child and had His ministry on earth. John 1.1-4 begins,

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

John says that Jesus is the “Word” of God. The “Word” has several different meanings. Jesus is the Word about God, meaning that Jesus’ life and teaching is the message that God wanted to share with the world. Jesus is also the Word of God in the sense that Jesus speaks authoritatively for God. To John’s first audience, “Word” also meant wisdom and was often applied to how God made the universe hold together, through wisdom. Along these same lines Paul says this about Jesus in Colossians 1.15-17:

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers—all things

have been created through him and for him. He himself is before all things, and in him all things hold together.

If all things hold together in Jesus, Jesus is in that sense the “Word” or wisdom of God that keeps even the whole universe together.

Another unique aspect about John’s gospel is that Jesus’ makes seven distinct statements about His identity:

- “I am the bread of life” (John 6.35, 48; compare John 6.41, 51: “I am the [living] bread who descends from heaven”)
- “I am the light of the world” (John 8.12; compare John 9.5)
- “I am the door (for the sheep)” (John 10.7, 9)
- “I am the good shepherd” (John 10.11, 14)
- “I am the resurrection and the life” (John 11.25)
- “I am the way, the truth and the life” (John 14.6)
- “I am the true vine (John 15.1, 5)²⁷

These statements are significant in and of themselves because of what they say about Jesus. Looking at John 14.6 as a specific example, Jesus is the way to God the Father, the truth *about* God the Father, and the life *that comes from* God the Father. As important as these statements are, what is even more impressive is what Jesus means when He says emphatically “I am.” When God told Moses to go to Pharaoh and demand the release of the Israelites, Moses asked, “If I come to the Israelites and say to them, ‘The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,’ and they ask me, ‘What is his name?’ what shall I say to them?” God said to Moses, “I AM WHO I AM.” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘I AM has sent me to you’” (Exodus 3.13-14). When Jesus makes all these “I am” statements, He is intentionally mimicking

²⁷Catrin H. Williams, “‘I Am’ Sayings,” *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*, 2nd ed., (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013), 396-99, at 397.

God's response to Moses. John is trying to underscore the important fact that Jesus is God-in-the-flesh.

A Quick Summary & Conclusion

Because there was sin in the world and in our lives that separated us from God, we needed a way to be reconciled with God. Jesus, God's unique Son, freely offered to take our sin on Himself and die in our place. By doing so Jesus made a way for humans to defeat sin and be brought back into a right relationship with God. The Gospel is the good news for all about what God has done in Jesus, and He offers this freely to everyone—it is just up to us to believe Him or reject Him.

The gospels themselves are historical accounts of Jesus' deeds and teaching written from four different perspectives that nevertheless still present Jesus as God's Son who came preaching and teaching about the kingdom of God—about God's reign and rule in our lives today. The Gospels tell us the story about Jesus, but the story of the kingdom of God does not stop with the Gospels—we have a part to play and God wants us to partner with Him.



**The story of the kingdom of God DOES NOT
STOP with the Gospels—we have a PART TO PLAY
and God wants us to PARTNER with Him.**

—KEVIN BURR—



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WHAT CHRISTIANITY HAS DONE FOR THE WORLD

JARED DOCKERY

Most of us have probably grown up in settings where Christianity was highly regarded, but there are certainly those who do not view it so. In December 2014, the e-magazine *Salon* ran an article by Amanda Marcotte entitled “9 ways Christian zealots cripple America.” The sub-headline promised “an examination of how religious fundamentalism holds the entire country back.” Among other things, she accuses “conservative Christians” of “starving the poor and casting them out to sleep in the cold” and helping to create a “rape culture” in the United States.²⁸ The late Christopher Hitchens wrote a 2007 book entitled *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Hitchens, who was an atheist, criticized not only Christianity but all religions.²⁹

In our time together, I want to refute the notion that Christianity has been a bad thing for mankind. In fact, Christianity has made the world a much better place! I will be relying heavily upon Alvin J. Schmidt’s book, *How Christianity Changed The World*.³⁰

²⁸Amanda Marcotte, “9 ways Christian zealots cripple America,” *Salon*, December 6, 2014. Available at http://www.salon.com/2014/12/06/9_ways_christian_zealots_cripple_america_partner/ (accessed September 1, 2015).

²⁹Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Hachette Book Group, 2007).

³⁰Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001).

Defended the Sanctity of Life

The first century world was a brutal place, where life was cheap—especially if you were a baby!

Murder of Babies and Children. One of the most horrendous practices of the ancient world was the murder of children. The Canaanite nations of the Old Testament practiced child sacrifice, but God sternly warned the Israelites not to do so (Deuteronomy 18.10). Unfortunately, some of the Jewish people did anyway, causing God, through the prophet Ezekiel, to cry out:

... you took your sons and daughters whom you had borne to Me and sacrificed them to idols to be devoured. ... You slaughtered My children and offered them up to idols by causing them to pass through the fire.

(Ezekiel 16.20-21)

Notice that God said these were His children!

Infanticide—the killing of infants—was common among the Greeks and Romans. Sometimes babies were killed because they were deformed or sickly; sometimes they were killed because they were girls; sometimes they were killed as human sacrifices. According to the historian Polybius, writing in the second century B.C., infanticide was responsible for causing Greece’s population to decline.

The early Christians opposed this horrible practice. The *Didache*, an early Christian document, commanded Christians not to commit infanticide. The practice was finally outlawed in the Roman Empire in A.D. 374, by the Christian



EMPEROR VALENTINIAN I

Emperor Valentinian. The Greeks and Romans were by no means the only ones to

practice this terrible sin. Much of the pre-Christian world did. Infanticide occurred among the natives of North America (including the Eskimos), as well as those in South America, Africa, Japan, China, and India. According to Professor Alvin J. Schmidt, the mostly successful campaign against infanticide "is one of Christianity's greatest legacies."³¹

Infant Abandonment. Closely related to the practice of infanticide was the abandonment of unwanted infants. Parents with babies they did not want would simply abandon them. Of course, many of these helpless babies would die anyway. But Christians opposed this barbaric practice; and, what is more, they gathered these children up and raised them as their own! In A.D. 374, the same Christian Emperor Valentinian also outlawed infant abandonment.³²

Abortion. Unfortunately, one of the heinous practices of the ancient world is still very much with us today: abortion. Plato and Aristotle both argued that if the population size was getting too big, expectant mothers should have abortions. Women, in ancient times, were able to kill their unborn babies by taking potions or drugs.³³ But early Christians opposed this practice. Indeed, it is hard to justify abortion on demand with the words of Psalm 139.13-14:

*For you formed my inward parts;
You wove me in my mother's womb.
I will give thanks to You, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made;
Wonderful are Your works, And my soul knows it very well.*

³¹Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed The World*, 49-52.

³²Ibid., 52-53.

³³Ibid., 56-57.

The *Didache* condemned abortion along with infanticide; and in the same year of A.D. 374, Emperor Valentinian also outlawed abortion. Christian thought continued to condemn abortion for hundreds of years. The brave German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, murdered by the Nazis in 1945, said this about abortion:

Destruction of the embryo in the mother's womb is a violation of the right to live which God has bestowed upon this nascent life.³⁴

Unfortunately, in 1973 the U.S. Supreme Court overturned state laws opposing abortion with its infamous *Roe v. Wade* decision. Today, Christians are leading the fight against abortion, just as they did in the ancient world.

"DESTRUCTION of the EMBRYO in the mother's womb is a VIOLATION of the RIGHT TO LIVE which GOD has BESTOWED upon this nascent life."

—DIETRICH BONHOEFFER—



Gladiators. The Roman empire showed disdain for life, not only in the way it carelessly ended the lives of unborn and newly-born children, but also in the appalling gladiatorial contests. These were fights to the death which pitted human beings (who were slaves, criminals, or prisoners of war) against one another or against wild animals. For example, during a four-month festival in the time of Emperor Trajan (A.D. 98-117), 10,000 gladiators took part in various blood matches; at least 5,000 were killed in action, and others died of their wounds later.

The early Christians opposed these gladiator contests and refused to attend them. Once again, it was the influence of Christianity which led to the ending of the gladiatorial games near the turn of the fifth century A.D. In the words of W.E.H. Lecky:

³⁴Ibid., 57-59.

There is scarcely any single reform so important in the moral history of mankind as the suppression of the gladiatorial shows, a feat that must be almost exclusively ascribed to the Christian church.³⁵

Ended Slavery

New Testament Teaching. The New Testament was written during a time in which slavery was common. The apostle Paul did not issue an outright condemnation of slavery. In fact, in Ephesians 6.5-8, he admonishes:

Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. With good will render service, as to the Lord, and not to men, knowing that whatever good thing each one does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether slave or free.

But Paul also instructed masters to be kind to their slaves. In the very next verse, he says:

And masters, do the same things to them, and give up threatening, knowing that both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with Him.

And in Colossians 4.1, he instructed masters:

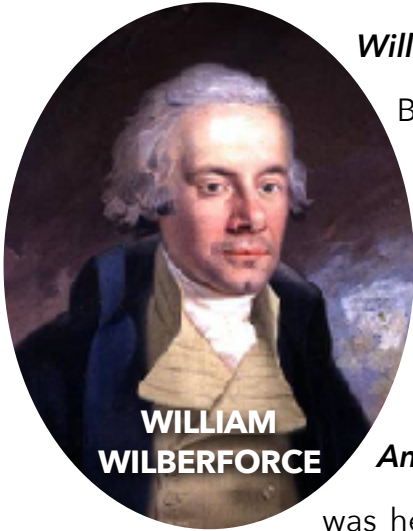
Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven.

So, even though Paul did not condemn slavery, he commanded masters to treat slaves with “justice and fairness” and to “give up threatening.”

Slavery Regains Popularity. Slavery had largely died down by the fourteenth century A.D., but it revived again in the seventeenth century. Unfortunately, it was anything but “just” and “fair.” Africans were captured and sold to slave traders, who transported them across the Atlantic in hellish conditions aboard slave ships. They were sold to

³⁵Ibid., 60-63.

work in plantations in British and French colonies in North America, including what would become the United States. All too often, their masters treated them harshly and with humiliation.



William Wilberforce. The great crusader against slavery in Great Britain was a member of Parliament named William Wilberforce, who was also a devout Christian. Largely as a result of his crusade against slavery, the British outlawed the slave trade in 1807, and outlawed slavery throughout their empire in 1833. The movie *Amazing Grace* tells the story of Wilberforce.

American Abolition. The abolition movement in the United States was heavily influenced by Christianity, as well. According to Schmidt, "Two-thirds of the abolitionists in the mid-1830s were Christian clergymen."³⁶ Abolitionists such as Elijah Lovejoy, Edward Beecher, and Theodore Weld were all preachers. Edward's sister Harriet Beecher Stowe, who wrote the very influential anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, was also a devout believer of Christ.

Cared for the Less Fortunate

Christ made it clear to His followers that they were to care for those less fortunate. In Matthew 25.34-40, Jesus described what the Day of Judgment would be like:

Then the King will say to those on His right, "Come, you who are blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry, and you gave Me something to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave Me something to drink; I was a stranger, and you invited Me in; naked, and you clothed Me; I was sick, and you visited Me; I was in prison, and you came to Me."

³⁶Ibid., 279.

Then the righteous will answer Him, "Lord, when did we see You hungry, and feed You, or thirsty, and give You something to drink? And when did we see You a stranger, and invite You in, or naked, and clothe You? When did we see You sick, or in prison, and come to You?"

The King will answer and say to them, "Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me."

Christ also made it clear that those who did not show this type of compassion to the poor would be lost. Another New Testament passage that instructs Christians to care for the unfortunate is James 1.27, where James writes: "Pure and undefiled religion in the sight of our God and Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world."

Poor. Platus, a Roman philosopher who lived from 254 to 184 B.C., was opposed to helping the poor. He said: "You do a beggar bad service by giving him food and drink; you lose what you give and prolong his life for more misery." But Christians, mindful of their Lord's instructions to the contrary, showed kindness to the poor and sick. For example, in the fourth century A.D., the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate—who was not a Christian and did not like them—admitted that Christians "relieve both their own poor and ours." One very touching story comes from the tenth century. There was a famine in Winchester, England, and the poor were starving. The Bishop of Winchester, a man named Ethelwold, sold the silver and gold vessels from his cathedral in order to buy food for the poor. He explained, "There is no reason the temples of God should abound in riches, while the living temples of the Holy Ghost starve for hunger."³⁷

Hospitals. Another way that believers in Christ served the unfortunate was through the creation of hospitals. There were few facilities to care for sick people in the

³⁷Ibid., 126-29.

ancient world. The Nicene Council of 325 directed every city that had a cathedral to also establish a hospice, which would care for the sick as well as provide lodging for travelers. Basil of Caesarea (in modern day Turkey) built a hospital in A.D. 369, and a wealthy widow named Fabiola donated funds to build one in Rome in 390. By the sixth century, hospitals were commonplace. Moreover, Alvin Schmidt observes:

Nearly four hundred years after the Christians began erecting hospitals, the practice drew the attention of the Arabs in the eighth century. Impressed with the humanitarian work of Christian hospitals, the Arab Muslims began constructing hospitals in Arab countries. Thus, Christ's influence, which moved his followers to build and operate hospitals, spilled over into the Arab-Islamic world, demonstrating once more that Christianity was a major catalyst in changing the world, even beyond the boundaries of the West.³⁸

Orphanages. We have already noted that Christians gathered up babies who had been abandoned and cared for them in their own homes. Christians likewise cared for orphans, whose parents had died. After Christianity was legalized in the Roman empire in A.D. 313, Christians started the world's first orphanages to care for children.³⁹

Disaster Relief. The Churches of Christ Disaster Relief Effort is a humanitarian relief agency which sends volunteers and supplies to help victims of floods, tornadoes, and other disasters. Since 1990, they have responded to more than 425 disasters in forty-four states, and have distributed more than \$124 million of supplies and food to

³⁸Ibid., 153-57; quotation on p. 157.

³⁹Ibid., 132.

disaster victims.⁴⁰ In the first eight months of this year alone, they have distributed \$9.5 million to disaster victims in fifteen states.⁴¹

Improved the Treatment of Women

Jewish treatment of women. Jewish men prayed to God, thanking them they were not born a Gentile, a slave, or a woman. Throughout much of the Muslim world, women are terribly mistreated even today. Women are repressed—forced to wear veils, not allowed to drive, not allowed to vote, etc. One very heinous practice in much of the Muslim world today is deliberately mutilating the private parts of young girls so that they will not enjoy sexual intercourse when they are older. But the Bible teaches that sex is a gift to be enjoyed between a husband and a wife (Proverbs 5.19).

Polygamy. One of the great contributions that Christianity has made to the world is to reinforce God’s original vision for marriage, which was to be a lifelong commitment between one man and one woman (Genesis 1.24). Unfortunately, God’s own people in the Old Testament, the Israelites, corrupted this vision. Even heroes such as Abraham, Jacob, David, and Solomon all had more than one wife. Not surprisingly, this arrangement proved to be a recipe for envy, strife, and heartbreak between wives, as they had to experience the humiliation of sharing the same man.

Fortunately, Jesus reaffirmed the original intention of marriage in Matthew 19.4-6, when he said:

And He answered and said, "Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife,

⁴⁰Churches of Christ Disaster Relief Effort website, "About Us," http://disasterrelieffort.org/?page_id=23 (accessed October 1, 2016).

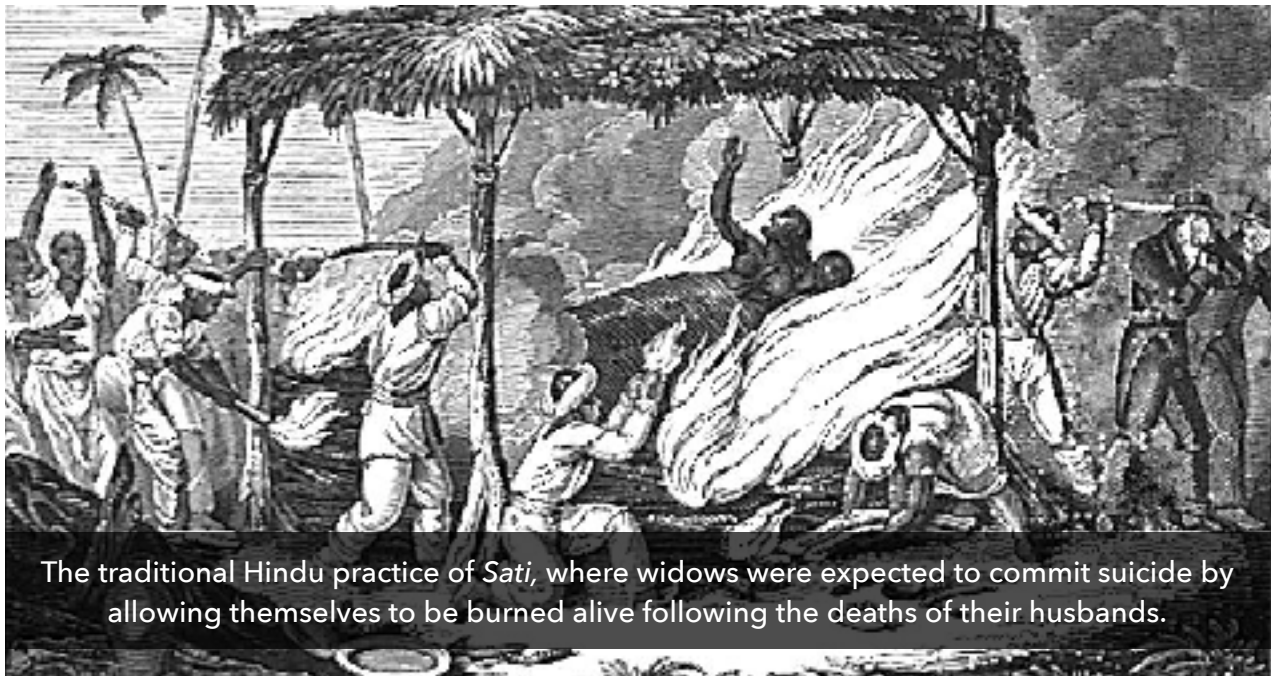
⁴¹Churches of Christ Disaster Relief Effort website, "2016 Involvement," http://disasterrelieffort.org/?page_id=1345 (accessed October 1, 2016).

and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate."

This Christian vision of marriage is much better for women than the practice of polygamy, which breeds competition and insecurity between "sister wives." Sadly, though, it is still common in the Muslim world today.

Treatment of Widows. The New Testament taught that widows were to be shown mercy. A group of men were appointed specifically in order to oversee the ministry of distributing food to widows (Acts 6.1-5). We've also seen the passage from James where he says that "pure and undefiled religion" includes visiting "orphans and widows in their distress."

Not all cultures have agreed that widows should be cared for. For hundreds of years in the Hindu country of India, a truly despicable practice regarding widows was observed. When a man died, his wife was expected to commit suicide by allowing herself to be burned alive! If she tried to resist this fate, she would sometimes be forcibly burned alive. There was a Hindu saying about women: "If her husband is happy, she should be happy; if he is sad, she should be sad; and if he is dead, she



should also be dead." India was not the only place that this heinous practice occurred. As Alvin Schmidt has observed, "History shows that widows were once burned in pre-Christian Scandinavia, among the Chinese, the Finns, and the Maori in New Zealand, and by some American Indians before Columbus arrived." India became part of the British Empire. The British, who were influenced by the teachings of Christianity, banned the practice of burning widows in India in 1829.⁴²

Foot Binding. In China, there was an ancient and terrible custom in which parents would bind the feet of little girls, in order to purposefully deform them for the rest of their lives. This was very painful. With their feet thus deformed, Chinese women would have to walk on their tiptoes, which men thought was attractive. Christian missionaries protested against this barbaric practice, and the Chinese government finally outlawed it in 1912.⁴³

Conclusion

Christianity has benefitted society in other ways, as well. It promoted education; many of the great universities were originally founded as divinity institutions. It inspired science; men such as Isaac Newton believed that God had created the world in an orderly fashion, and set out to discover the laws of nature. Christianity has inspired art and beauty; artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo, and Rembrandt produced masterpieces with Biblical themes, and magnificent cathedrals dot Europe.

Of course, the ultimate benefit of Christianity is not the improvement that it brings to life on earth, significant though this is. Its ultimate benefit is that it leads us to eternal life with God. This is the true message of Gospel!

⁴²Ibid., 116-17.

⁴³Ibid., 118-19.



JONATHAN GODSEY

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Jonathan has served in youth ministry internships with the Owens Cross Roads Church of Christ (Alabama), the Valley View Church of Christ (Arkansas), and the Farmington Church of Christ (Arkansas), and much of his passion for ministry has been shaped by those congregations.

Jonathan's passions include creating intergenerational dialogue in our churches, developing stronger relationships between local congregations, and ending the church-hopping trend that hampers growth and outreach.

SAVED FOR A PURPOSE

JONATHAN GODSEY

What are some of your dreams? You have a whole life in front of you, so what do you want to accomplish? Do you want to travel the world? Do you want to buy a new car, house, or private island? Who wants to become president? Would you like to get married? What's your dream profession? The options are endless. These are your dreams after all! I want you to keep a mind on all of these wishes; we will refer to them at the end.

This conference is about developing a deeper faith in Jesus, but now that I have this faith, what in the world do I do with it? I think there is a whole lot of good that we can do by looking to see what others have done with their faith. Christ said that the faith of a mustard seed can move mountains. Well, have they ever been moved? I think it is pertinent that we look through history and learn from those who shared our faith long before you or I existed. I don't believe we look to those who came before us often enough, but there are valuable things to learn. Why do we worship the way we do? Why do our buildings look the way they do? Whose idea was the Trinity anyway? These are all things that those who came before us helped to give us. The story I am going to share from the history of the church might not be one you have heard before.

Persecution

From the years AD 222-248, Christianity had some prosperous times

in the Roman Empire. Alexander Severus is an emperor who can be thanked for this prosperity. He was fascinated with the philosophies of the world. He began to explore one philosopher to another, and one of the teachers he really enjoyed was Jesus Christ. During this period Christianity blossomed. It spread into Asia minor, Egypt and North Africa. But the prosperity soon ended. One entire generation of Christians did not feel the persecution that their forefathers had felt. I'm sure that they had heard stories about how you could not trust the Roman government. "All we need is one bad Caesar getting in charge and all of us Christians are done for!" But the Christians had become so comfortable that they did not think real persecution was possible. Then came a terrible persecution.

Emperors Decius (AD 249-251) and Valerian (AD 253-260): these guys were the real deal. Christians had been uprooted at times before, but honestly, Christianity, up until this point, had just been another sect of the Jewish faith. With Decius came the first empire-wide persecution of Christians. No one knows exactly why the orders were given but there are multiple options—it was probably a mix of a few situations. The Roman empire had been growing weak for a long time. Decius needed an excuse for the weakness this empire was showing, and Christians were an easy target. During the reign of Decius the empire would celebrate its 1,000 year anniversary. Decius forced the citizens back to traditional and ancient customs of the Romans. All were forced to give sacrifices to the gods. Those who refused were executed. All you had to do was offer a sacrifice to the gods and in exchange you received a *libellus*. This was essentially a Roman receipt that proved you had sacrificed to the gods. The problem is that Christians would not sacrifice because of Matthew 10.33. Some people paid guards to give them a false *libellus* in exchange for money. Some Christians even offered a sacrifice to the gods only half-heartedly because why would God punish someone over such a simple request? Decius even went so far as to arrest all of the

higher clergy of the church. But as bad as Decius was, Valerian was even worse. Valerian sent all of the church's bishops into exile. He forbid that the church meet together and to ensure that they wouldn't, he seized all church property and funds. The clergy that Decius exiled, Valerian called back, and then had a lot of them executed.

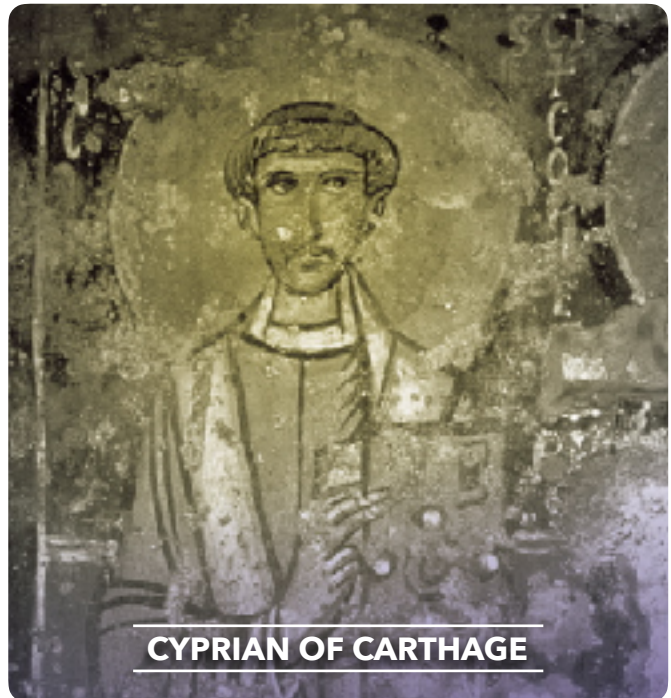
But emperors come and go. There would even go on to be other times of prosperity, and even worse persecutions, but at the end of the Valerian reign, the church had to make decisions. There were people who claimed to be Christians who sacrificed to the Roman gods. These people had lapsed in their faith and as a result they were called *lapsi*. In Matthew 10.32-33, Jesus said:

Therefore everyone who confesses Me before men, I will also confess him before My Father in heaven. But whoever denies Me before men, I will also deny him before My Father in heaven.

If Christ will not allow someone into heaven, then what right did the early church have to allow them back into the body? Within the church, there was a great division over how to respond to those who had lapsed in their faith. The strictest group believed that there was absolutely no chance that the *lapsi* could go to heaven, that man cannot overrule the will of God, and that, therefore, the *lapsi* cannot be readmitted into the church. On the opposite side of the spectrum (these were usually the people who were beaten for not offering sacrifices but survived), the other group believed that for the *lapsi* to ever have a shot at eternal life, they needed to be forgiven and accepted by the church. The reasoning went that the *lapsi*, of all people, desperately needed to meet with the rest of the body of Christ.

These two opposing forces were dividing the church. Bishop Cyprian of Carthage offered a middle ground. He proposed three different steps that must be followed in order to be readmitted to the church. First, they had to perform the works of penance. Cyprian

wanted to see them make an attempt to prove they were sorry and were growing in their relationship with God. Second, they had to confess in front of the church and the church had to agree that the person could be readmitted. Third, the person was reconciled by the bishop and the clergy laying hands on them and with prayer.



Cyprian's middle ground approach is the option that the church ended up accepting but even this caused a schism in the

church. Everett Ferguson said, "After a generation of peace, the church as a whole was unprepared for the challenge. Many had grown **comfortable** in their acceptance of Christianity, and vast numbers lapsed from their faith by obeying the command to sacrifice."⁴⁴

This makes me ask two huge questions. First, if we experienced a nationwide persecution how would our church bode today? I have not faced real persecution, and I do not even have stories of ancestors of mine facing persecution. If anyone is comfortable in their faith and their everyday life, it is our generation. We are more than one generation removed from persecution, and it terrifies me.

Second, if a Christian were to deny Christ, what would we as Christians think or do? And you may think that it would cause uproar but the truth is that we deny Christ daily over much more trivial things, and do not bat an eye as a church. Am I lying? Has our

⁴⁴Everett Ferguson, *Church History, Volume One: From Christ to the Pre-Reformation: The Rise and Growth of the Church in Its Cultural, Intellectual, and Political Context* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2013). Emphasis added.

faith become so soft that the denial of the Father would not pose questions? Are we as soft as a roll of Charmin toilet paper, ultra-soft? Then what have we done with our faith?

Before we continue I am going to provide a link to a video on the interwebs. This is from *Crazy Love* by Francis Chan. Skip forward to the 5:49 mark—without the video you will not understand the remainder of the lesson: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UdrizzZlvUA>

Sanctification means a couple of things... Kind of

In 1 Corinthians 6.9-11, Paul makes the case that it is at the washing of the person that we become sanctified. This throws a wrinkle in the belief that we can become more like Christ as we grow in our faith. It goes against what Francis Chan claims this Christian faith has become like in America. And I've even heard preachers talk about how we continue to grow in sanctification. How in the world is this verse compatible with the claims that we can grow in sanctification?

Earlier, though, in 1 Corinthians 1.2, Paul says, "To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those **sanctified** in Christ Jesus, called to be **saints** together..." Let's look at those two words, *sanctified* and *saint*.

The words *sanctified* and *saint* come from the same Greek word, *hagios*, which means "holy." *Sanctified* is a verb that literally means, "**made holy.**" *Saints* is a noun that literally means "**holy ones.**" This is how Paul referred to the Christians at Corinth and is apparently how they thought of themselves. Paul called them by what they were. It is no mistake that he used these two words with close roots next to one another. The Corinthian church was holy, or set apart. They were different from the world they were in, and because of this they needed to show the world Christ's holiness.

But this isn't the only way Paul uses the world sanctified. In Romans 6.20-23, he writes:

For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. But what fruit were you getting at that time from the things of which you are now ashamed? For the end of those things is death. But now that you have been set free from sin and have become slaves of God, the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life. For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Here sanctification means something that happens along the way. We produce fruit and the fruit we produce over time will lead to sanctification.

So sanctification is something we receive at baptism but is also something that develops over time. We mature in our faith, and we grow as Christians, and we become holy, or more like Christ as we grow. For the Corinthian church, they got it. They were surrounded by people who were involved in sinful lifestyles that were the opposite of what they had been called to as Christians. When they put on Christ, they put away the things they used to do and grew in their relationship with God. Do you think it was comfortable to walk by the temple that you used to work at and go home? It wasn't that simple. People recognized when the Christians in the Corinthian church stopped taking part of the sin they were involved in. Their entire lives changed. Their friends changed. They may not have even been able to talk to their brothers any longer because they would lead them back to the temple and false gods.

Growing in our faith *does not equal* being comfortable in our faith.

The scripture that most readily reminds me of this is Matthew 25.14-30. The Parable of the Talents is one of my favorites, and it's probably because my family has always loved the qualities of the one-talent man (except maybe that he was only given one talent!). This man had been entrusted by his master to keep something of value. Each of the three men knew they would one day have to return the talents that they were given. In my mind maybe the five-talent man or the two-talent man had sinned

because they gambled with their master's talents! Instead the one-talent man is the one who gets the short end of the stick. He is cast into outer darkness because he is worthless. Every good thing about me was given to me by my God. Why were these gifts given to me? They were given so I could use them, grow with them, and grow the kingdom with them.

Our society is on the move. Everything about our world is in motion. Social media, texting, Skype, basketball, ballet, social clubs, and Netflix binge-a-thons; these are all okay things in moderation. But if the things we do make us more comfortable in the world we live in rather than helping us grow our talents for the Lord, then what is their value? The world gives us these new technologies to free up our time, so that we can enjoy the time that we have. Rather than freeing time, we have gorged ourselves with activities. I have worked with multiple youth groups. We try every year, in a plethora of ways, to get kids plugged into youth group. Youth groups are healthier groups for kids to be in than in a lot of the groups that kids find themselves in. And the harder we work, the greater push back comes, not from the kids, but a lot of times from the parents. To parents: the baseball commitment you tell your kid he has to finish because he committed to it is *less* important than the commitment that he/she made to the Lord. To kids: I guarantee that the Netflix you spend hours devoting your life to is not helping you develop the talents God has called you to develop in your life.

I used to have a Steam account for my computer, and I spent days on it playing *Civilization 5*. I beat that game in every way possible. I beat it with every country available. I would win as a warlord or a peace advocate on any difficulty level. I began to notice the time I logged into this game: 400 hours...that's only a half a month. 4000 hours...that's nearly half a year! And that was only on my Steam account! These things that are supposed to free our time up are consuming the time I should be spending with God! The world is forcing us to bury these talents. Why would Satan

want us to use our time wisely? It would be much more profitable for him to sit back and let our minds be washed with tv, video games, sports, and dates. None of those things get us in trouble, if done in the correct way, but none of them bring us closer to our Lord either. These things only make us more comfortable in our world. Youth groups push kids to make relationships where they wouldn't have happened otherwise. Churches bring people together who never would have met otherwise. Churches are also meant to reach out to people who never would have been evangelized otherwise. It's not comfortable to cry with a person over sin that you've committed. It's not comfortable to beg for forgiveness when you've done somebody wrong. It's not comfortable to go hang out with a bunch of strangers and worship God with them (unless you're a mega extrovert), but those things are growing talents for the kingdom of God.

This summer I worked with a youth group that ministered to visitors using a book called *The Lunch Ladies*.⁴⁵ The goal of the book is to encourage teenagers to go out of their way to be uncomfortable so that visitors to the youth group did not have to be. What this looked like in action was a senior girl approaching freshmen and not only talking to them before class but sitting with them the entire class period, asking for their numbers so that she could tell them when events were coming up, and then adding them to the youth group Instagram page so they could stay plugged in. It looked like them meeting once a week to discuss what progress they had made on reaching the people who were out on the fringes. While those activities are uncomfortable, that's real ministry. When kids rearrange their work schedule so they can show up to youth activities, that teen is getting every talent worth. **Are you getting your talents' worth?**

⁴⁵Philip Jenkins, *The Lunch Ladies: Cultivating an Actsmosphere* (Mt. Juliet, TN, 2015).

In Matthew 16:18 Christ tells Peter, “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.” We get carried away with what in the world Christ meant by rock. I believe firmly that the rock Christ is talking about is the truth that Peter had just told Christ. My Catholic friends disagree with me. More important than this is that Christ tells Peter that the gates of Hades will *never* prevail against the kingdom of God. Make no mistake here. Hades does not have an offensive weapon. Hades is only set up to defend herself, if Christianity is done in Christ’s way. As a Christian you have been given a long sword. You can pierce and prod the gates of Hades. But the gates will never prevail against the offensive of the Kingdom. Your job, and what you should be trying to do with your faith, is to attack those gates with everything you have. You shouldn’t be worried if you go take up with the boy nobody likes because he smells kind of weird—that’s kingdom growth. Every

You shouldn’t be worried if you go take up with the boy nobody likes because he SMELLS KIND OF WEIRD—THAT’S KINGDOM GROWTH.

Every time you DEFEND the person who CAN’T DEFEND THEMSELVES—THAT’S KINGDOM GROWTH.

Every HUNGRY BELLY YOU FILL by serving at a shelter—THAT’S KINGDOM GROWTH.

And if you want to become a MISSIONARY in a foreign field and your parents have asked you not to keep bringing it up because it’s DANGEROUS—tell them it’s KINGDOM GROWTH.

—JONATHAN GODSEY—

time you defend the person who can't defend themselves—that's kingdom growth. Every hungry belly you fill by serving at a shelter—that's kingdom growth. And if you want to become a missionary in a foreign field and your parents have asked you not to keep bringing it up because it's dangerous—tell them it's kingdom growth. And you shouldn't be worried because the gates of Hades will never prevail against anything you do for the kingdom. We take the offensive to Satan, not the other way around.

Do you remember those dreams and goals I had you write down at the beginning of class? If they interfere with the work you could be doing for the kingdom, then are you willing to mark out every dream in the margin?



WHIT JORDAN

received his undergraduate degrees from Harding University before living in Mexico for ten months and then earning a Master's and a Ph.D. in Hispanic Studies from the University of Kentucky.

He is currently a Spanish professor at Harding, where he helps sponsor two student organizations.

Whit and his wife Nicole have a beautiful young daughter, Katherine, and an infant son, Andrew. Their first son, Elijah, suffered from a rare chromosomal condition and lived for just under two hours.

GOOD NEWS IN A TIME OF TRAGEDY

WHIT JORDAN

As a way of sharing with you a little bit about myself, below is a picture of my wife Nicole, my daughter Katherine, and me. My wife and I are also expecting a son in about a month.



But today I will not be focusing on them; rather I will be telling you about my firstborn son, Elijah Jonathan Jordan:



ELIJAH JONATHAN JORDAN

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain.

(1 Corinthians 15.1-2)

As we begin, I would like to ask you a couple of questions to consider. First, what are some of the best things that can happen in a person's life? You may have had some amazing experiences yourself or you may have heard from other people what some of the most incredible events in their lives have been. What are some of the best things that can happen in a person's life?

When I was trying to synthesize a list of things from comments I have heard from other people, this is the list that I came up with: Baptism, marriage, birth of a child, or maybe your favorite team winning a championship.

Now I am going to ask the second question which is the inverse of the one I just asked: what are some of the worst things that can happen in a person's life? It may be something that you have experienced. It might be something that a friend or someone else has shared with you first hand. It might just be something that you have heard about.

I will not presume to make a call on what is the absolutely worst thing that can happen to a person, but there are many things that can cause serious tragedy in our lives. In times of tragedy, people sometimes seem to question God more or doubt that He really cares about them. It is in these times of tragedy, however, that the Gospel, the Good News that we are talking about so much this weekend, can provide immense comfort. The Gospel can also instill in us the perseverance,

character, and hope that we need to stand firm and hold fast to the word, as was mentioned in the verses I read in opening.

One tragic occurrence that can devastate the lives of people is the death of a child. The loss of a child used to be much more common than it seems to be now, but even in that historical context, it could still profoundly affect people. The former president of the United States, Dwight D. Eisenhower, for example, lost his firstborn son. Later in his life, Eisenhower wrote about this loss:

“This was the greatest disappointment and disaster in my life, the one I have never been able to forget completely. Today, when I think of it, even now as I write about it, the keenness of our loss comes back to me as fresh and terrible as it was in that long dark day soon after Christmas, 1920.”⁴⁶

My wife and I have also experienced the loss of our firstborn son right around Christmas time, specifically, Christmas Eve, 2013. When we did, we were surprised at how many people had experienced something similar, whether it was a child dying shortly before or after birth, once they had grown older, or a miscarriage. Even in this day and age of advanced medical breakthroughs, the U.S. Department of Health and Human services reports that about 1 in every 5 pregnancies that women are aware of in the United States still end in miscarriage.⁴⁷ In addition to that, some pregnancies end in stillbirth and infants continue to die in their first year of life. Since most women get pregnant multiple times, the likelihood of this affecting you at some point is actually, and unfortunately, pretty high.

⁴⁶Quoted in David Brooks, *The Road to Character* (New York: Random House, 2015).

⁴⁷“How many people are affected by or at risk for pregnancy loss or miscarriage?” U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2013. Available at <https://www.nichd.nih.gov/health/topics/pregnancyloss/conditioninfo/Pages/risk.aspx>.

Times like these can be difficult, and sometimes we do not know where to turn when it seems like our situation is more than we can bear. Even the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 1 admits that he and those with him were utterly burdened beyond their strength, and that they even despaired of life itself. He also, however, mentions several things that helped them persevere through the trial, and that also helped me endure. Paul knew from Scripture and from his past that God had delivered him and that he would deliver him again. This knowledge of what God had done and would continue to do strengthened him and his companions. They were also strengthened by their fellow believers. Paul acknowledges their prayers and requests more prayers from the faithful believers to whom he was addressing the letter (2 Corinthians 1.8-11).

Back in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul talks about the Good News which should give us hope. After reminding us to stand and hold fast, he reminds us of the Gospel, the Good News, which is what we stand upon:

For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. Then he appeared to more than five hundred brothers at one time, most of whom are still alive, though some have fallen asleep. Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles. Last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.

(1 Corinthians 15.3-8)

While that is very good news, it is sometimes difficult to remember it when you are going through a situation like the one my wife and I endured. To begin with, once we started to actively pursue having a child, we had to wait several long months. Each time we discovered that my wife Nicole was not pregnant yet, we questioned more and more what was happening and why, when we had followed God's plan for

marriage and sexuality, that he was not blessing us with a child. Although I do not think I did a terrific job comforting my wife in those times, I hope I did at least slightly better than Elkanah at the beginning of I Samuel. I will pass on to you the same advice that my fourth grade Sunday school teacher gave to my class. If your wife appears to be infertile, don't tell her, quoting Elkanah "Hannah, why do you weep? And why do you not eat? And why is your heart sad? Am I not more to you than ten sons?" (1 Samuel 1.8). It was probably not his best strategy, nor do I recommend the guys here to try saying, "Wife, why are you so sad? Don't cry! Look at me! Aren't I awesome! You don't need kids; you've got me!" Guys, try to avoid saying things like that. And girls, when he does stick in foot in his mouth (because it will happen), please forgive him.

Anyway, after many months, my wife and I finally found out we were expecting. We were thrilled and thought up fun and elaborate ways to share the news with our families and friends. We surprised my dad so much that he was speechless for at least half an hour. We had fun trying to plan different things about a nursery or what we would name him. We enjoyed seeing a heartbeat at the first ultrasound at about eight weeks, and we were looking forward to finding out if we were having a boy or a girl at the second ultrasound which takes place at 20 weeks, or halfway through the pregnancy. This ultrasound is the anatomy scan, and it is most well known for being the scan of the male or female anatomy. The doctors and ultrasound technicians, however, have a lot of other things that they look at while doing the scan. They check for all sorts of markers and measurements.

My wife and I entered the ultrasound as a typical couple excited to find out if we were having a boy or a girl. The technician was able to show us several things about our baby, but then everything came crashing down around us. Pretty quickly the doctor came in. My wife and I have often wondered if the technician had a panic

button that she was able to push if she noticed some issues, but whether or not that was the case, the physician came in and began showing us several indicators that something could be wrong with our little baby. We later found out that we were having a boy, but the doctor focused at first on the fact that he had a cleft lip and a cleft palate, that he had enlarged kidneys, and that he had issues with his heart and umbilical cord. These four factors together indicated that there may be something more serious and possibly genetic that he was dealing with.

My wife and I were shocked, and in order to have some time to think and process what I had learned, I went for a run that afternoon. I needed that time of physical exertion and that time of quiet solitude with my feet pounding the ground so that I could have time to think about and begin to comprehend what was happening. During that run, I sang several songs and repeated to myself several phrases. The two phrases that summed up a lot of what I was thinking were, "The LORD is sovereign; He is God," and "The LORD gives, and the LORD takes away. Blessed be the name of the LORD." Those two sentiments began to sink in as I was processing all this new and tragic information.

We decided that we wanted to know what we were up against, so a couple days later we had another test done. The results of this one showed that our son had Trisomy 13. Trisomy 13 is a nonhereditary, genetic disease in which the thirteenth chromosome has three copies instead of the normal two. Besides age, there are no known risk factors or causes. It is something that can randomly affect anyone. There are several other trisomies. The most well known is Trisomy 21 which is more commonly referred to as Down syndrome. Trisomy 18 is where the 18th chromosome has three copies instead of two, and it is significantly rarer than Down's. Whereas people can live with Down syndrome, Trisomy 18 is a much more lethal condition. It frequently results in miscarriage, and of those who are born alive,

only 10% make it to their first birthday. Finally, there is Trisomy 13, which is what our son had. Trisomy 13 is rarer and more lethal than either of these other trisomies, and the average lifespan of babies who make it to birth is seven days.⁴⁸

Immediately, even before we had found out the specifics, we started to receive encouragement from several sources. These sources are very similar to the ones that Paul mentioned in 2 Corinthians 1 when he and his companions felt overwhelmed. First, our families supported us during the entire process. Our church family also was there the entire time helping us and encouraging us in whatever way they could. Just as Paul received encouragement and prayers from his fellow Christians, we too had similar support. Secondly, the promises of God, his faithfulness to fulfill his promises, and his power that he had proven time and time again had encouraged Paul and also encouraged me. God's church and God's word can provide immense support in times like these, but it is important to already be founded in them before the storm comes. In Matthew 7, Jesus tells about the wise and foolish builders. They both built houses, and they both suffered through storms. All of us will also have to suffer through storms. I do not know what you will have to deal with, but at some point the rains will fall, the floods will rise, and the winds will blow. I pray that you are already well established with a firm foundation at that point—a foundation like the one in Matthew 7 that is built on hearing Jesus's word and putting it into practice.

The following story is one example of how a combination of Scripture and my church family were encouraging to me. A couple months after we received the news that our son would likely die very soon after birth even if he made it that far, I was at

⁴⁸"Trisomy 18 (Edwards), Trisomy 13 (Patau)," Pediatrics Clerkship, The University of Chicago, 2013. Available at <https://pedclerk.bsd.uchicago.edu/page/trisomy-18-edwards-trisomy-13-patau> (accessed March 14, 2017).

church one Wednesday evening. The congregation was all together at this point, and one of the middle school young men was leading singing. He was still pretty new to it at the time, and I thought that his posture and manner of leading singing were hilarious. He stood up front looking completely stoic with his arms folded across his chest like this. Despite his bearing, he picked out several good songs and did a fine job leading singing. One of the songs that he had chosen was the "Magnificat," which comes from Luke 1.46-55 when Mary is praising God because she was going to have a child. In the scripture, Mary says things about praising God and rejoicing in him, about how the Lord has done great things, about how God had been mindful of her and had blessed her forever. I had enjoyed that song for several years, but that night it took on a very different meaning for me. Like Mary, I was also awaiting a child, but I had very different expectations. Despite this, the words of the song are still true. Even though Elijah was going to die, my soul still rejoiced in God, my Savior. Even though I would lose my son, I will still give glory to God the Father, God the Son, and God the Spirit. Even though I would not get to raise my son, the Lord was still mindful of his servant, of me, and I will be blessed forever, forever. Even though my son would die, God alone is mighty and worthy. God has done great things.

Nicole and I found out that our son had Trisomy 13 in early October 2013, and he was born nearly three months later when he was still two months early. We went to the hospital two days before Christmas and were immediately admitted for the delivery. Our families dropped what they were doing and descended on us in Lexington, Kentucky, to be with us during this difficult time. Our church family at the North Lexington Church of Christ also provided great support during that time. Several came to visit us and pray with us. Several ran errands for us. And one even brought us a homemade birthday cake for Elijah.

Our son was born at 1:53 AM on Christmas Eve, and Nicole and I had almost two hours to hold him while his heart was still beating. A lot of our family members were able to come be with us, and we spent a lot of Elijah's life reading Scripture, singing, and praying. God's word and God's church were our companions as we passed through this tragedy. Eventually, my wife and I wanted some alone time with our son. We continued to read to him and sing over him. Up until that point he had been ensconced in Nicole's arms, but she handed him over and let me hold him for a while as well. I wrapped a baby blanket around both of us to try to keep him warm. I rocked him in my arms and sang songs to him again and again. A nurse would come in and check his very slow heartbeat every now and then. Finally, at 3:49 AM, nearly two hours after his birth, Elijah's heart had stopped beating. Nicole had carried Elijah into this world and I held him as he left it.



As I mentioned earlier, a couple phrases that kept recurring to me from the very beginning and through the tragedy were that the LORD is sovereign and that He is God, as well as these verses from Job 1.20-21:

Then Job arose and tore his robe and shaved his head and fell on the ground and worshiped. And he said, "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The Lord gave, and the Lord has taken away; blessed be the name of the Lord."

The song "Blessed be the name of the Lord" is based on this passage. It is another one of those songs like "Troublesome Times Are Here" that are very upbeat but that also mention suffering. Some people think that these ideas are incompatible, but we should rejoice in our sufferings. Before we went through our experience with Elijah, I never paid much attention to the parts of this song that focus on being "found in the desert place," or walking "through the wilderness," or "When the darkness closes in," or "On the road marked with suffering, though there's pain in the offering." Now, however, after having gone through some wilderness and darkness and being able to think about those sufferings, I still try to rejoice and say, "Blessed be the name of the Lord."

We read earlier in 1 Corinthians 15 that Paul and others had declared the Good News that Jesus had died according to the Scriptures, been buried, and had been raised according to the Scriptures. While that is good news, how does it relate to me when I face such an intense tragedy? When my firstborn son dies, how does the Good News give me encouragement? If we continue reading that passage, we find the answer:

Now if Christ is proclaimed as raised from the dead, how can some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? [...] And if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain. [...] But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man

has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, then at his coming those who belong to Christ.

(1 Corinthians 15.12, 14, 20-23)

The Good News is that we too can be raised from the dead. We can follow Christ and join him. We have followed Adam in this world and we will continue treading the path he laid out by going down to the grave; however, we can also follow Christ. We will die, but we will also be made alive eternally.

When Nicole and I first got the diagnosis that Elijah had Trisomy 13 and would probably not live very long, we both decided that he needed a special name, a powerful name, a name with great meaning. His first name is Elijah. In the Bible, Elijah has always been one of my favorite people. He appears towards the end of 1 Kings and the beginning of 2 Kings, and God performs several miracles through him. He is then mentioned many other times throughout the Bible, for example, in Malachi, in the gospels in relation to John the Baptist and at the transfiguration, and in the book of James. Elijah was a powerful prophet before the LORD, before Yahweh or Jehovah. In addition to the great things that he did in the Bible, his name also has great meaning. It means, "The LORD is God." When we first got the diagnosis, one phrase that stuck out to me was that God is sovereign, God is in charge, he is the LORD. So Elijah's first name is "The LORD is God."

Elijah's middle name is Jonathan. Although there are several Jonathans in the Bible, the most well known is David's friend who appears in 1 Samuel and who unselfishly helped David, although he was going to take his kingdom. Jonathan means, "The LORD has given." Another phrase that stuck out to me right after we got the news was "The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD." God blessed us with a son, but our son is no longer with us. Blessed be the name of the LORD.

Elijah's last name is Jordan which means "descender" because the river descends from the mountains north of Israel down to the Dead Sea. A couple metaphors have arisen involving the Jordan River. The Israelites had to cross the river to get to the Promised Land in Joshua 3. Later, Jesus promised us that he would go and prepare a place for us. So we must now metaphorically cross Jordan to reach the Promised Land of heaven. Another way of looking at the river is that it descends to the Dead Sea. All of us are making that same journey. Some people, like Methuselah or Jared, have rivers as long as the Amazon or the Nile. Elijah's descent was much shorter, but he has now crossed Jordan into the Promised Land to be with the LORD. In 2 Samuel 12.23 David, who had been mourning the death of his own son, then got up and declared, "Can I bring him back again? I shall go to him, but he will not return to me." I have that same sentiment. I look forward to the day that I can join David, his son, and my son Elijah with God in heaven.

Knowing this hope that we have of being resurrected with Christ and rising up from the grave, I gave my son a proverb that was a reminder of that. My father had given me a proverb when I was young, so I had decided that I would give proverbs to my children as well. The proverb that I gave Elijah was, "They shall mount up with wings like eagles." This verse is found in the context of some people questioning God and wondering if he cares or if he pays any attention to them, but God reminds them that the LORD is God, and that he is their strength. Isaiah 40.27-31 reads:

Why do you say, O Jacob, and speak, O Israel,

"My way is hidden from the Lord, and my right is disregarded by my God"?

Have you not known? Have you not heard?

The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth.

He does not faint or grow weary; his understanding is unsearchable.

He gives power to the faint, and to him who has no might he increases strength.

Even youths shall faint and be weary, and young men shall fall exhausted; but they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength;

they shall mount up with wings like eagles;

they shall run and not be weary;

they shall walk and not faint.

In ancient times, people questioned whether or not God was paying attention to them. We still do the same thing now. But God reminds us that he is God, that he does not grow weary, and that he gives us strength. The proverb I gave my son from this passage, "They shall mount up with wings like eagles," reminds me that God has promised that he will lift us up, that he will make us alive in Christ, and that we too will be resurrected from the dead. They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength.



The loss of my son was tragic, but the promise of the resurrection is good news. Back in the I Corinthians 15 passage, Paul next anticipates a question from his audience asking what the resurrection will be like. I Corinthians 15:35-38, 42-50:

But someone will ask, "How are the dead raised? With what kind of body do they come?" You foolish person! What you sow does not come to life unless it dies. And what you sow is not the body that is to be, but a bare kernel, perhaps of wheat or of some other grain. But God gives it a body as he has chosen, and to each kind of seed its own body. [...] So is it with the resurrection of the dead. What is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. Thus it is written, "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became a life-giving spirit. But it is not the spiritual that is first but the natural, and then the spiritual. The first man was from the earth, a man of dust; the second man is from heaven. As was the man of dust, so also are those who are of the dust, and as is the man of heaven, so also are those who are of heaven. Just as we have borne the image of the man of dust, we shall also bear the image of the man of heaven. I tell you this, brothers: flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable.

In this passage it talks about seeds being sown. If you were to just look at a seed and had never seen the plant before, you would have no idea what the plant would actually look like. Here on earth, we only see the seed. We have not yet seen what we could be; what we should be. We have the potential to become a wonderful plant, but right now we are just a seed, very different from the end result. I do not know what kind of body we will have at the resurrection. I wonder if it will be like the transfigured body of Jesus when he met with Elijah and Moses. At that time, Jesus' "face shone like the sun, and his clothes became white as light" (Matthew 17.1-3). I do not know if that is what our bodies will be like, but I do know that our bodies will be different. Here on earth, we are subject to corruption. Our bodies are perishable. In heaven we will have incorruptible bodies, imperishable bodies. Here as seeds,

we know we are just a bare kernel. Once we are resurrected by the power of God, we will bear the image of the Man of heaven.

With my son Elijah, I received a powerful reminder of the fragility of life and the corruption in our bodies. In Matthew 7 as Jesus is approaching the end of the Sermon on the Mount, he says, "Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!" (Matthew 7.9-11).

For a while these verses taunted me. I wanted to be able to give my son bread, fish, and good gifts, but I was not even able to give him a full nose. As you may be able to tell from the earlier photos, his cleft lip and cleft palate made it appear as though he were missing part of his nose. I had wanted to give my son a strong, healthy body, but our bodies are perishable, corruptible. I shared this sentiment with Nicole one evening, and she was able to remind me of the many things that we had given Elijah. We had given him the chance to live. We had given him all the love we could. We had given him the chance to be with his family. We had spent part of the time doing some of the most important things that we can do on this earth by reading Scripture, praying, and praising God in song. But we could not give him an imperishable body. Only God can do that. And the Good News in our time of tragedy was that God promised that what is sown is perishable; what is raised is imperishable. It is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory. It is sown in weakness; it is raised in power. It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.

Romans 8.18-23 also speaks of this idea:

For I consider that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us. For the creation

waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of the children of God. For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.

The promise of incorruptibility, freedom, and the redemption of our bodies reminds us also of the promises of Revelation 21. Beginning in verse 4, John writes that God “will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away. And he who was seated on the throne said, ‘Behold, I am making all things new’” (Revelation 21.4-5). Earlier we referred to the terrible things that can happen in this life. In heaven, there will be no mourning. There will be no pain. God is making all things new. Our old perishable bodies are only seeds. God will redeem our bodies. We will lose this form and take on another form, an imperishable, new, spiritual body. We will be whole. My son will be whole. That was another part of the Good News in my time of tragedy.

The Revelation 21 passage talks about being made new and having no more pain. It also mentions that there will be no more death. This is the final part of the Good News that Paul shares with us in 1 Corinthians 15. He mentioned it briefly early on and then comes back to that same idea as he is finishing his discussion on the resurrection. Beginning in verse 24, Paul writes, “Then comes the end, when he delivers the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all his enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Corinthians 15.24-26). Picking back up in 15.51-57 as Paul is wrapping up this theme, he affirms,

Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written:

"Death is swallowed up in victory."

"O death, where is your victory?"

O death, where is your sting?"

The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.

We are victorious through our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus has been victorious over death. Death no longer has rule over us. We no longer have to lose to death. My son has died, but where is death's victory in that? The mortal puts on immortality. I am sometimes reminded of the death of my son, but I am also reminded of the assurance we have through Jesus Christ that we can defeat death.

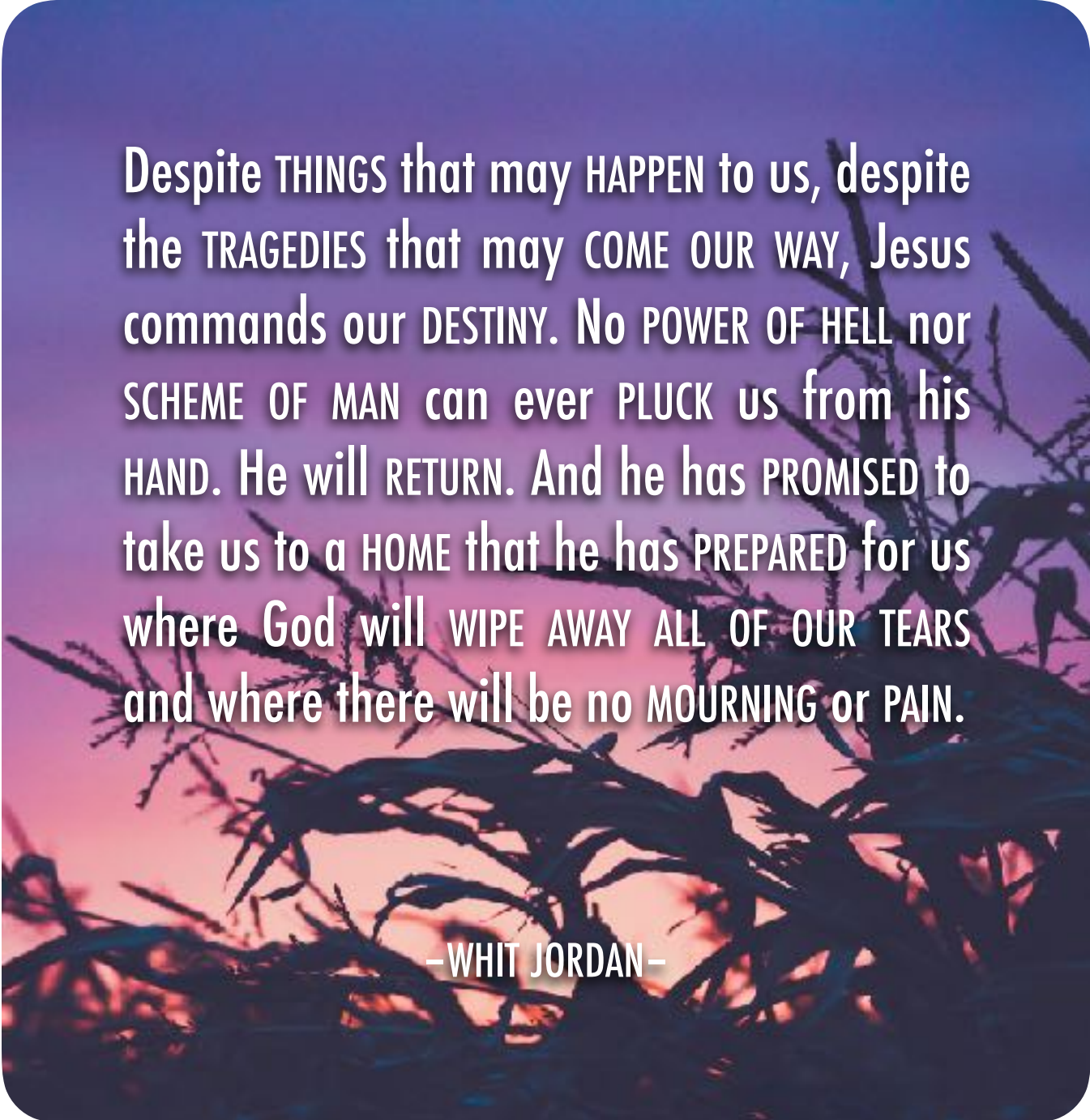
One of those reminders came one weekend a couple months after we had lost Elijah. Nicole and I went with several people in our families to a lake house to spend some time together. We were worshipping God on Sunday morning and singing several songs. One of them was "In Christ Alone." Like the "Magnificat" that I mentioned earlier, this song has also taken on new meaning to me having gone through the experience with Elijah. The first verse reminds us that Christ is our cornerstone, that in him we can find peace, and that in him our fears are stilled. Jesus is our comforter. The second verse reminds us that Jesus was also a baby, like Elijah. Jesus also was crucified so that we might live. The third verse speaks of the victory over sin and the grave that we have in Christ. Christ rose from the dead. Now sin can no longer

maintain its hold on me. Death will be no more because it has been swallowed up in victory. We have been bought with the precious blood of Christ.

As my family and I were singing this song at the lake house, we reached the fourth verse and sang, "No guilt in life, no fear in death, this is the power of Christ in me." The next line, however, came up as a surprise to all of us. It caught us completely off guard, and we all choked up. It reminded us of the corruption and mortality of this life. The line is "From life's first cry to final breath." When Elijah was born, he did not have a first cry. He barely had a gasp. He intermittently and infrequently continued those very weak gasps for breath until he breathed no more while he was in my arms. Despite things that may happen to us, however, despite the tragedies that may come our way, Jesus commands our destiny. No power of hell nor scheme of man can ever pluck us from his hand. He will return. And he has promised to take us to a home that he has prepared for us where God will wipe away all of our tears and where there will be no mourning or pain. "Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ."

As we approach the end of this session, I would like to conclude with one more passage and then summarize what we have discussed. First, I will read and briefly discuss the verse with which Paul finishes his discussion of the resurrection, the last verse in chapter 15. Then I will read a letter that I wrote to my son Elijah which summarizes a lot of what I have said today. I Corinthians 15:58 says, "Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain." Paul began this section by telling us to stand and hold fast to the Gospel. He ends it by reminding us to stand firm and to be steadfast. Isaiah had spoken about mounting up with wings like eagles, then running and not getting tired, and finally walking without becoming faint. Sometimes, it takes all of our effort to just stand firm. The only way we can

stand firm, however, is if we are on the right foundation. When the rains come, the floods rise, and the winds blow, I pray that you hold fast to the Gospel and remain steadfast on the rock of the Word of God, receiving encouragement from God's Word and his Church.



Despite THINGS that may HAPPEN to us, despite the TRAGEDIES that may COME OUR WAY, Jesus commands our DESTINY. No POWER OF HELL nor SCHEME OF MAN can ever PLUCK us from his HAND. He will RETURN. And he has PROMISED to take us to a HOME that he has PREPARED for us where God will WIPE AWAY ALL OF OUR TEARS and where there will be no MOURNING or PAIN.

—WHIT JORDAN—

Finally, and as a summary of what I have told you today, this is a letter that I wrote to my son while he was still in the womb. By this time, I knew that he would likely never be able to read it, but it was helpful for me to write it:

October 8, 2013

Elijah Jonathan,

We love you so much. We are proud that you are our son. We decided on your name today. Elijah means The LORD is God, and Jonathan means The LORD has given. After 10 months of trying to have a child, we were so thankful that the LORD had given you to us. But as it says in Job 1.21, "The LORD gives and the LORD takes away. Blessed be the name of the LORD."

A week ago yesterday (September 30), we discovered that your ultrasound had some irregularities. We had gone in for the normal 20-week ultrasound to make sure everything was going well and to find out if you were a boy or a girl—definitely boy. We are excited about that, but we also got news we did not expect. You have 4 markers: cleft palate and lip, ecogenic foci in your heart, dilated kidneys, and omphal[o]cele in your umbilical cord. You will have to ask your wonderful mom more about the medical aspects since she is the expert. We had some additional tests done Thursday (Amniocentesis) and got the preliminary results yesterday. They show that you have Trisomy 13. Research indicates that there is nothing that can be done to prevent or cause it. It unfortunately randomly appears. There was even one case where with identical twins, one had it and the other did not.

We are so sorry that it has affected you. We have prayed hard for you, and our church families have prayed hard for you. And we all will continue to do so. We love you so much and want the best for you. Unfortunately, we do not know what the best is. But, The LORD is God. He is sovereign. He knows what is best. So I pray that God's will be done and that I can be the best father possible for you. I am thankful that the LORD is God (Elijah) and that the LORD has given (Jonathan) you to us. With the Trisomy 13 diagnosis, if you are born alive, the average lifespan is one to two weeks. Your last name, Jordan, means descender because the Jordan River descends to the Dead Sea. We are all descending toward death, but it seems that your course will be

very fast. Then you will cross into the Promised Land, crossing Jordan and going to heaven.

We pray the best for you and that God's will is done. We pray that we may one day see God's plan in this. This is a fallen world that we have contributed to, though we try to follow Jesus's example. The LORD was not joking when he kicked us out of Eden. But the LORD is God and the LORD has given. You may descend quickly, but you shall mount up with wings like eagles. We grow weary and faint here. We stumble and fall. But those who wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint. My father gave me the proverb that to whom much is given, much is expected. I am thankful to have been given you. Your proverb comes from that verse at the end of Isaiah 40: "They shall mount up with wings like eagles."

We love you and look forward to meeting you, either on this earth or when we get to heaven after crossing Jordan into the promised land.

Give your mommy a good roll for me.

Σ' αγαπώ [I love you]



#IRL:LIVING OUT THE GOSPEL IN A SOCIAL MEDIA WORLD

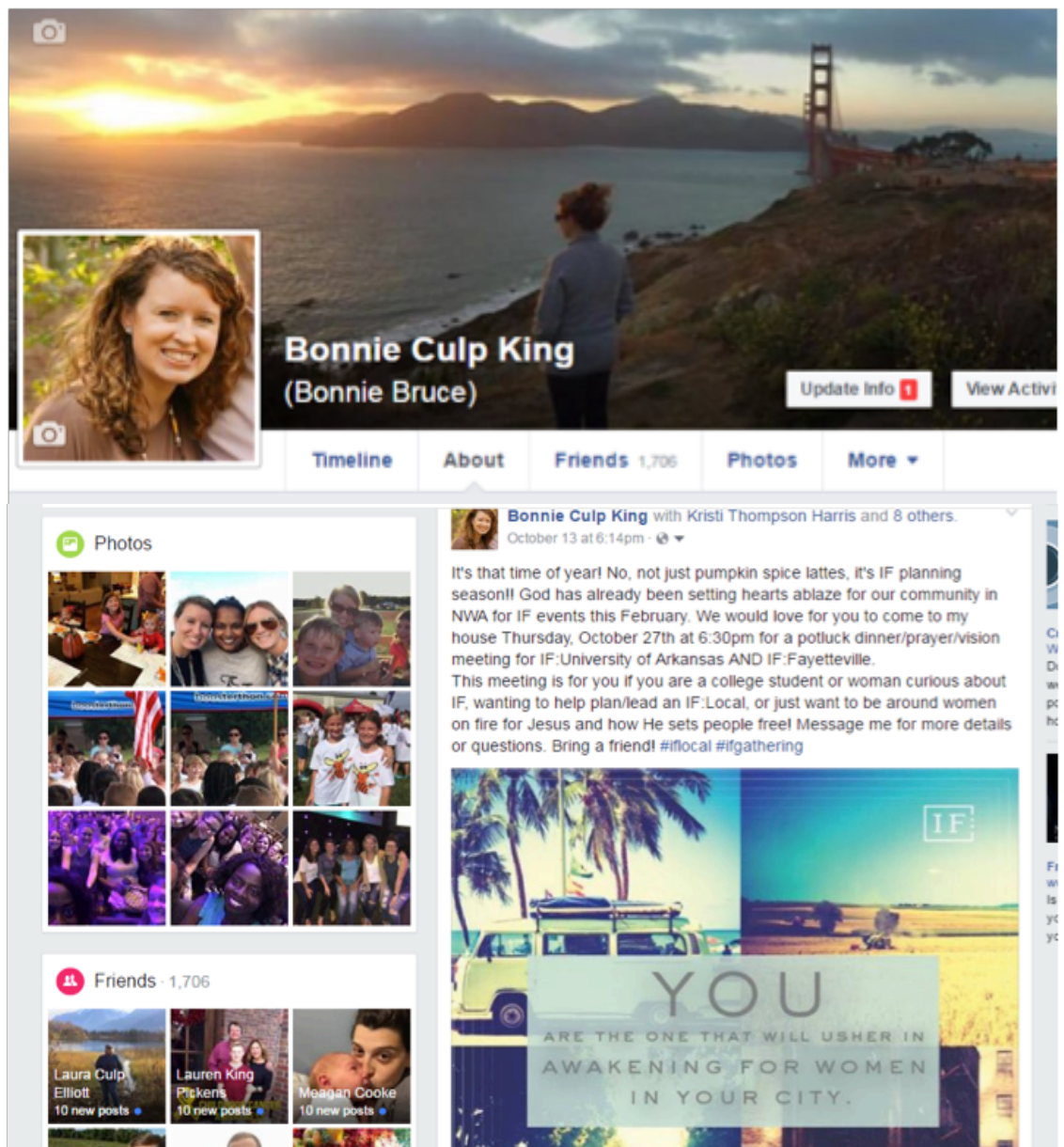
BONNIE KING

BONNIE KING received her Master's degree in teaching from the University of Arkansas and is currently a full-time Clinical Instructor at the University in the Childhood Education program. She attends Mount Comfort Church of Christ in Fayetteville, Arkansas, has led a ladies bible study in her home for ten years, and is active within ministries throughout Northwest Arkansas.

She and her husband, Tyler, have been married for 5 years, and are parents to three amazing, energetic children.

Bonnie is passionate about spreading the message of freedom found in serving God and her desire is for unity among Christian women in order to reach our communities for Jesus.

Who are you? My name is Bonnie King. Before I tell you about myself let me show you what the "world" of social media sees of me:





mrsbonnieking Edit Profile ...

131 posts 448 followers 195 following

Bonnie King Northwest Arkansas. Focused on finishing the race heavenward 2 Tim 4:7 I love my family, Dr. Pepper and reading five books at once. #wps live.ifgathering.com







Bonnie Culp King @bonnieculpking

Northwest Arkansas. Finishing the race heavenward 2 Tim 4:7 I love my family, Dr. Pepper and reading five books at once. #wps

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Ask yourself what do you know about me after seeing these screenshots? What picture does it paint of me?

Would you know from these snapshots of my life that I deal with anxiety, symptoms of PTSD, grief, doubt, insecurity? Would you be able to infer I love Jesus so much that I want to walk up to strangers and ask them if they know Him because of how He brought me out of my depths? Would you know from my social media the true me?

What even is the “true” me? What is the “true” you? Do you feel your social media reflects who you truly are? Is this a bad thing? Why do we choose what we do to put on social media? What are we trying to prove? And to whom?

I have given you a lot of questions to think about as to what your true identity is. Where can the truth be found in who we are? It depends on what or who you let define you.

If I let the world define me, it would be crushing. I’ve been told to not rock the boat when it comes to calling out social injustices, stay close to home in order to be “safe,” and far more damaging are the lies I hear from the enemy of our Lord. He whispers through any conduit available that we are not enough, not loveable, not “good” enough, not funny enough, or cute enough or whatever your thing is. Satan has our numbers, ladies. We have to call out the lies for what they are and be firmly rooted in who we truly are...which is a beautiful daughter of the Lord!

But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.

(John 1.12)

If I can remember this, hold onto it, nothing can shake me! It’s such a gorgeous reminder of who our true Father is and how much He loves us—no matter the amount of “likes” or retweets from the world.

Social media is here to stay. It will evolve as all things do over time, but as Ecclesiastes 1.9 says, “There is no new thing under the sun.” Of course we could say, “But wait until you hear about iPhones ancient scribe man!”

I have come to understand what this verse is actually saying is the basic concepts dealt with in this broken, yet redeemed, world are still all the same. Is an iPhone or technology inherently evil? Of course not! But just as any tool or device can be used

for good, it can also be used for evil. It is up to us as a people “set apart” (1 Peter 2.9) to act and react to the world very differently than our non-believer peers.

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.

(Romans 12.2)

We have been given all the tools at God’s disposal to help us discern what is good and acceptable and perfect. We do not want to get hung up on what *looks* perfect, but perfection through the blood of Jesus which cleanses us continually through sanctification (1 Corinthians 1.30). This looks like vulnerability, hospitality, compassion, fruit of the spirit, to name a few, and all of this can come through in our amazing tool for spreading the gospel: the internet!



If I let the world DEFINE me, it would be CRUSHING.

–BONNIE KING–

So now what?

And this gospel of the kingdom will be proclaimed throughout the whole world as a testimony to all nations, and then the end will come.

(Matthew 24.14)

Let's imagine if Peter and Paul had access to the internet? Their passion and fervor for Jesus would definitely spark a firestorm of "comments", wouldn't you agree? Who would believe their stories of miracles? Why might an audience not believe if they read about the occurrences over a Facebook post?

I believe God knew what we most need is community in the flesh. There is a reason why the Bible says to lay hands on those that are ill in order to pray. Facetimeing a prayer request is powerful, however having that person in the same room, next to you on the couch praying over you by grabbing your hands is what the kingdom is all about, wouldn't you agree?

What steps can we take to ensure we are living out our life IRL and not through a smoke and mirrors façade? And how can we use social media to impact our sphere of influence? Think about where you live, go to church, play sports, go to school. It is not by coincidence that God has you right where you are today or any other day of the week.

Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations.

Jeremiah 1.5

When we can start remembering the goal of being alive is to be reconciled to God and bring as many people with us as possible, doesn't that put a special bullseye on your spheres of influence? Why can't *you* be the one to be different? Actually put your phone on silent, facedown on the table to show the person you are with that her time with you is worth being distraction-free, all on, important. Parents may be worse off

than your generation because we did not grow up with it the way you have. But we can be learning together how to handle the tricky road of social media together. You aren't alone!

Social media obviously is not all negative and fake. It helped me overcome the darkest year of my life. When my husband died, Facebook was an easy way for his students and my extended circle of family and friends to get a hold of me. I clung to the words of encouragement and hope offered in that sacred space.

And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.

Romans 8.28

God knew this amazing worldwide platform would be available to use for His glory! It's up to us to decide how we will use it. For our "glory" or His?

Scroll through your feeds...how does it make you feel spending ten minutes on social media? Are you "filled" or depleted?

Now that we have established that no one is the sum total of what we see on social media, what does this mean for us as we decide what to post? How can we build others up? What would happen if we all proclaimed Truth on our feeds?

Jesus walked the earth and used His friends to help spread the gospel! He used His influence over the people He encountered. Would Jesus use social media? An interesting question! I think we can see by the way He lived on earth that He understood the need for communication, and that the scrolls and letters from the Old and New Testaments were the way words would spread and make their way to the ends of the earth. We are now to the point where we can translate using Google into 50 languages!

Sometimes the problem with our postings isn't the content or what we put out on social media but our issues with how it is perceived and "liked"...or not. I have learned that in order to obey God and post my heart on any media outlet, I have to be sure my identity is rooted deeply in Jesus or I am easily broken off by the way the "world" criticizes, questions, or ignores my posts. It's not about what *they* think or say; it's what God thinks that matters. If I can remember this I can become very bold and enthusiastic for spreading the gospel.

Your Feed (What are you feeding?)

Our "feed" is covered by Jesus' blood if we have received him through the baptism of our old selves. If we have given our lives over to following Jesus, then we have assurance of our place in heaven. This is a beautiful, astounding gift, but it's not all we are promised. If we step out in obedience to follow Him in faith in our everyday actions, He will take those decisions and strengthen us as we become more Christ-like every single day. The joy we can experience here on earth is another astounding by-product of our acceptance of Jesus as Lord of our life. The confidence we can have, peace, and community are all part of the experience of being a Christian that some of our brothers and sisters in Christ miss out on! They become complacent in their sureness of salvation and do not realize what can be had while on earth. Encouraging a sister on social media for the world to see—how would that make you feel? Can we be the change we want to see in others? Can we learn to forgive those girls who do not know their identity is not from what is presented on social media or at school?

What would you like to hear right now from a peer? Can you post it? Why or why not? What are we afraid of? Your bravery will cause others to stand up and be brave. That's the beauty of walking in obedience to what God is calling you to do!

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.

(1 Corinthians 11.1)

Jesus didn't die for our Instagram life or our Pinterest life. He died for our real life!

(Jo Saxton)

It is a good thing to be ardent in doing good, but not just when I am in your presence. Can't you continue the same concern for both my person and my message when I am away from you that you had when I was with you?

(Galatians 4.9, MSG)

What are some physical steps you can take when feeling the pressure to post something on social media or checking for "likes?"

Pray. Ask a friend to remind you of the Truth of your identity! Step away from the e-device and do something that brings you joy (dance, read a book, take a walk, tell your parents or a friend you need a reminder!)

We are in a battle for our time and minds, ladies! Where we spend our time is where we invest for our future and for our joy (or lack thereof.)

Which book do you think of when needing some community? Facebook or the Bible? Is social media sustaining the need God created for community in our souls?

Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

(Acts 2.46-47)

How are disciples made according to the Bible? Can we use social media to see those that may be hurting? Or needing Jesus? Is it possible that breaking bread with someone would be more effective than "liking" a prayer request?

What good is it, my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is poorly

clothed and lacking in daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace, be warmed and filled," without giving them the things needed for the body, what good is that? So also faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead. But someone will say, "You have faith and I have works." Show me your faith apart from your works, and I will show you my faith by my works.

(James 2.14-18)

In what ways do these verses from James sound like what social media can be?

How can we make a stand, ladies? Pray!

For if you remain silent at this time, relief and deliverance for the Jews will arise from another place, but you and your father's family will perish. And who knows but that you have come to your royal position for such a time as this?

(Esther 4.14)

God brought you to where you are at this time at this place for a reason. He desires for you to be a part of the amazing gift of creating disciples with Him. There is nothing else like it in the world or heavenly realms. You do have a choice, though—be a part of the magnificent glory God provides for those on earth who love Him and obey, or sit idly by while you wait to go to heaven. I'll take the riskier path, the one that has proven to be the most exciting, daily life-altering experience, and there is no scarcity with our omnipotent God. This can be the day you decide to stop letting "likes" from the world dictate your feelings and start letting the root of Truth take a hold of your grounding so that nothing can sway you very far. Your wise friends and family will help you gain back your footing as Satan tries to get a foothold on your new-found freedom! There is someone in your life needing the hope that you have, and you're here because you have this hope that they desperately need.

And who are you really?

Find a friend you can grab hands with and tell each other the following:

You are a daughter of the most high King. He loves you more than you can fathom. He will be your Comforter, Protector, Counselor, and Father. Please do not worry about what the world thinks of us in real life or social media life. You are an intricate, complex, beautifully-made woman after God's own heart. He sees you. He sees where you are and He loves you in spite of it all. All glory to God and may we not keep track of our likes! Amen

For further reading I highly recommend *Love Idol* by Jennifer Dukes Lee.⁴⁹ Here are some of my favorite quotations from the book:

Before the foundations of the world, He loved you. Before the fall of Eden, He loved you. Before He sent His Son splitting through the cosmos to this world, He loved you. Before He died upon the cross, He loved you. When He rose again, He loved you. And He's coming back again because He loves you. When you took your first breath, He loved you. When you messed up bad, He loved you. When you made good grades, He loved you. When you won and when you lost, He loved you.

Christ continually shouts through the universe, "You have a love that is already yours. You have nothing to prove to anyone. You have nothing to prove to Me. You are significant and preapproved and utterly cherished. Not because you are 'good,' but because you are Mine."

Until you are convinced of God's incredible love for you, you will continue looking for replacement love everywhere but in the heart of Christ.

⁴⁹Jennifer Dukes Lee, *Love Idol: Letting Go of Your Need for Approval and Seeing Yourself through God's Eyes* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale, 2014).



MIKE RAINE has been preaching for 40 years, and has been the Preaching Minister for the Farmington Church of Christ since 2013.

Mike is passionate about saving souls and is a tireless worker in God's Kingdom.

He and his wife, Donna, have three adult children: Rachel, Joshua, and Caleb, and one granddaughter, Macy.

THE GOSPEL IS FOR ALL

MIKE RAINE

For though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. To the Jews I became as a Jew, in order to win Jews. To those under the law I became as one under the law (though not being myself under the law) that I might win those under the law. To those outside the law I became as one outside the law (not being outside the law of God but under the law of Christ) that I might win those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings.

(1 Corinthians 9.19-23)

Disciples of the Lord are told to go "into all the world and preach the gospel" (Mark 16.15-16). We are told to "make disciples" (Matthew 28.19). We are told to go into the highways to find and make disciples, to offer the gospel to all (Luke 14.23).

Where would you and your family be if someone hadn't shared the Gospel with you? My mind is taken back to the 60s (yes, that is the year the ark came to rest on the mountains). Men so committed to spreading the good news, came to New Zealand to start a church. We were raised in the Church of England. These men took their young families to move to the other side of the world because they cared about souls. Men like Jim Woodroof from Searcy, Arkansas, John Payne from Tullahoma, Tennessee, Harold Scott from Knoxville, Tennessee, and Marvin Allison from Memphis, Tennessee. These families shared the gospel with my family via a VBS. They converted my mother first, then a year later, my

father. My father converted four of his sons; all are active in church ministry. My father baptized my grandmother on my mother's side. My father baptized our twin boys, Joshua and Caleb, when he was visiting us in Alabama.

Where would our family be if they hadn't cared enough to come to New Zealand?

Lost.

The value of one soul is seen in God's preparation to save us. He gave Himself in giving His Son (John 3.16). He gave His Son to die for us while estranged and enemies of His (Romans 5.8-10). You are worth far more than all the treasures of this world to the Creator of the world. If you gain this world, yet lose your soul, you have lost everything and gained nothing (Matthew 16.26).

Now back to 1 Corinthians 9.19-23. Paul adopted whatever approach he could to reach as many as he possible could, knowing he would only reach a few. He realized that he was but a seed planter (Luke 8.11); God is responsible for the increase (1 Corinthians 3.6).

What Paul is trying to impress upon us is he would do **whatever it took** (within scriptural standards and principles) to win souls.

In a mission effort I went on with Scott Harp to the Yap Islands just below Guam, I was told that if I would wear a Lava Lava (much like the Fijian men wear or those of Samoa) I would endear myself to the natives. I was given this advice by the grandfather of the Pacific, Robert Martin. A Lava Lava is a dress-like



Paul would do **whatever it took** to win souls.

garment wrapped around your waist that hung just below your knees. So, wanting to be better presentable to the people, I wore this dress. What they didn't tell me was the men on the Southern part of the island did not wear a Lava Lava, they wore more of a thong wrap around (much like a diaper). The ladies of the island wore a Lava Lava. So Robert Martin sent me out dressed like a lady. I wondered if something was wrong when both the kids and the men of the village would look at me but pretend they weren't looking. I felt like a clown.

Would you wear a kilt to endear yourself in Scotland?

Paul would do whatever it took within certain boundaries to preach so others might hear and obey God's saving message. Paul did not become a drinker to work with drunkards. He did not become immoral to reach the fornicators. I don't know that he would be radical enough to become a Razorback fan to work with those in Arkansas—that would be crossing the line!

Paul did however take a vow (Acts 18:18). Paul asked Timothy to be circumcised as they would be better received by the Jews (Acts 16). These were customs found under the Old Testament. Neither Paul nor Timothy were under the Old Law, but the New. In doing what they did, they endeared themselves to the listening audience, yet violated no New Testament standard.

Paul was so committed to preaching the Word of God in order to bring people to Christ, he said he was willing to be cut off (lose his own soul) if only he could go back and preach to his own countrymen one more time (Romans 9:3).

Is there anyone you would be willing to die for in order for them to have life?

That is commitment to the command to go preach. Think about that: he was willing to be lost—eternally lost—so that his countrymen could be saved—eternally saved. Would you go to that extreme to save a soul?

There is something you can do to help people come to know the Lord. A kind word, a card, an invite to a youth activity, something. What is your passion?

We must understand that every person is unique. Some will be great, active, intelligent, and personable. Others are reclusive, rebellious, non-compliant, and do radical activities to gain some needed attention. If we can understand background, we are more likely to understand behavior. There are many, many young folks in our area who do not believe they are worth anything to anyone. That number seems to be increasing. They believe their lives don't matter. Therefore, in many instances, life is valueless, maybe not worth living. We have the answers; it is the message of the gospel. That message gives hope when lived right and demonstrated before our friends. Jesus said, "I have come that you might have life and have it more abundantly" (John 10.10).

As we go out to reach people, our goal is to bring them into a church community of believers, but what environment are we bringing them into? Does the society of believers look that much different from what they see in the unbelieving community? Are Christians behaving themselves like the Christ or the world? We are told that we must live in the world but not emulate the world (John 17; Romans 12.1-2).

Questions we have might include:

- Are we worthy of the kingdom?
- What makes us worthy?
- What are the blessings of the kingdom?
- Do my good works count in the kingdom?

- How do I share the kingdom with my friends?

The greatest power we have in our community of friends is “Christ living in us, the hope of glory” (Colossians 1.27). You let Christ dwell in you. You just be the best vessel for Him to accomplish His purpose.

If we are going to take the gospel out into the world to take the world out of people, let’s make sure we have the best environments and community to welcome them into. The church is an incubator for young Christians—those immature in their faith—to grow and mature given time. We are to be a caring, one another community. We are to be a community of taking second seat, honoring those who feel like they are worthless, useless, and unwanted.

Let’s look at that wording, “One Another.”

“One Another”

- Used 100 times in 94 verses. There are 59 “one another” commands.
- 47 give instruction to followers of Christ.
- 60% of those written by Paul.
- 1/3 about the church getting along.
- 1/3 instruct Christians to love.
- 15% attitudes of humility and deference among brethren.

There is no “I” in church. No Lone Rangers. This is passively observed yet not something that is terribly embraced. Be in harmony with one another.

New South Whales Health System

In New Zealand where I am from, there is a war going on in their hospitals—a battle if you like. It is not a battle trying to control a new golden strain of staff infection. It is not

a battle to fight a new mutant, super strong bug that has gotten out of control. It is not a battle trying to staff hospitals with good qualified nurses or doctors to keep the doors open or the emergency room or neo-natal rooms open.

It's not even making sure everyone that comes into the hospital sanitizes their hands to reduce the spread of disease. No, these things are important, but there is a bigger struggle. You can't miss it when you walk through the main entrance of the hospital. It is impossible to miss it.

There is a struggle and battle with *smokers*. There is an unrelenting battle in Australia and New Zealand against cigarette smokers.

The cost of cigarettes went from \$5 per pack to a low of \$23 per pack. By 2020, New Zealand plans on being smoke free.

It has taken on the proportion of a religious crusade and one of the battlegrounds is the entrance to hospitals. For patients and those visiting them, the hospital is a fairly stressful environment to be in. There is a tendency for them to want to have a cigarette—light up!

Of the population of New Zealand (4.5 million), 15% are adult daily smokers: 550,000 adults. Of the population of Australia (23 million), 8 million adults 18 years and older are daily smokers; 15,000 die per year with heart diseases related to smoking. It is a biggy.

Most governments just legislate it. If anything goes wrong, we just add more laws—we just can't get enough of them!

You are not just forbidden to smoke in the hospital, and hospital entrances, but anywhere on hospital grounds (smoking apparently makes you illiterate, because smokers can't read the signs!). The smokers sit in front of the signs but must not be

able to read them. I have wanted to simply turn their heads and read the signs for them, but I value my life. To make things worse, Washington Regional puts ashtrays right below the signs, but they still throw those nasty butts on the ground.


A battle is waged, and hospitals are a battleground, but smoking is an addiction (dependency), and it is hard to stop people from doing it. They put signs up, used on-the-spot fines. They tried shaming the smokers; they tried all kinds of different things.

Then they came up with a winning solution.

They started playing discordant music (disagreeable to the ear, harsh, uncomfortable music). I am serious. They put in big loud speakers, and they started playing music that was abrasive, music that was confronting. No voices, just a train wreck of sounds.

You know what? You won't find anyone who is trying to smoke outside listening to that noise. It works; it actually works! Discordant sounds, the lack of any sort of harmony produces an environment where people just don't want to be.

It is not surprising that God wants harmony in His church. Surely as disharmony drives people away—even people who are addicted to cigarettes from the entrance to hospitals—so disharmony drives people away from the church. It is also hardly



The lack of any sort of HARMONY produces an ENVIRONMENT where people JUST DON'T WANT TO BE.

—MIKE RAINE—

surprising that we find instruction that deals with the need to live in harmony (Romans 12.16).

I am sure you have examined different aspects of this chapter as it deals with the way we interact with each other—how we deal with each other. There are a few “one another” passages dotted through the early part of this chapter, not using that distinct term, but uses the thought to define our Christian service in terms of how we relate to one another.

This is not an unusual theme in the scriptures. John the apostle says that if we say we love God but don't love one another, then guess what? We don't love God (1 John 4.7-8, 11, 20)! Seeing this is a fairly consistent theme means the early church had a problem with this very thing that we read about here. It is safe for us to assume the early church had a problem with harmony (even the apostles experienced disharmony).

Disharmony is a problem of being of the same mind, of being on the same page.

I like the thought and image of harmony as can be heard in this song: (“There’s a Stirring” by Acapella, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=edNWDQBolOE>). Can you hear the harmony as they layer their parts? They have different words and notes, but they are singing that same song.

In Romans 12.16, there are two very distinct parts to this verse. First, there is “Live in Harmony”, which means to have the same mind. Paul gives us some tremendous yet difficult advice.

Then, in Romans 12.16b, “do not be proud, but instead, be willing to associate with people of low position.” This portion has to do with a judgmental, condescending

spirit. It is believing you are so much better than those around you. We are all sinners saved by grace (Ephesians 2.8ff).

A classic story of this is illustrated in the parable condemning the Pharisee for his devaluing of the Tax collector in Luke 18. Walk in the other person's shoes—walk their walk. We look on behavior and judge people by their behavior. That's not surprising at all. What Paul is saying here is if you want to be in harmony, you need to understand *why* people behave the way they do. There is always a reason. It doesn't necessarily change what they do, but it changes how you see it.

If you would overcome this tendency towards pride, then as Paul puts it here in this verse, he says quite simply, "Be willing to associate with people of low position."

In other words, get into their lives and understand something about them. Walking where other people walk requires time and sacrifice, but that is what we are called to do.

How do we create harmony—an environment that is attractive to those we bring in?

We do not create harmony by having more and more activities. We don't create harmony by coming up with some slogan we all repeat every Sunday. That is not how you create harmony. It looks like harmony, but that is not harmony.

How did Paul say we create harmony? Here's what I want you to do, I want you to go live in someone else's shoes, someone else's life, for a while to understand what it is like to live that way.

Some translations have the words, "never be conceited." There is a reason for this. Consider the way in which this is worded. Most translations say "do not," and "not" is really firm here. If your child is misbehaving, "DON'T DO THAT!" is different from "Don't do that." A child knows the difference in the firmness of someone's voice; we all understand the firmness in someone's voice.

Here, Paul gives a hard "DO NOT." It is harsh: "NEVER!"

Never be conceited. If we go to the trouble of understanding other people (walk in their shoes), yet don't deal with the conceit issue we often have, it will be of no avail.

In other words, these are not separate thoughts; it is part of the same thought.

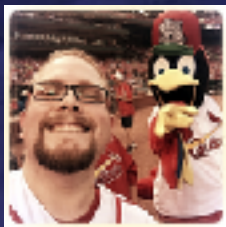
He is saying to these Christians in Rome (and by extension, through the Holy Spirit's preservation, to us), you need to consider where people are coming from and where they have lived, and because of this, you should refuse to be conceited.

What would you be willing to do in order to reach people?

Would you be more willing to make sacrifices knowing your efforts would change the direction of people's lives?

Keep planting, keep being transparent, and keep loving and caring for those around you. Make yourself available to those who are hurting, those looking for real answers to life's difficulties. Let God shine through you to shed light on others. You are the light on a stand. You are the city set on a hill. Let all you do bring glory to our Heavenly Father. Light doesn't shine bright through a dirty glass. Keep yourself pure and clean.

One day you will be told by God all the good you have done. Don't lose hope (Revelation 14.13).



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He and his wife Rachel have been married for 18 years, and are parents of four sons. Devin and his family love to hike, watch movies, and cheer on the 11-time World Series champion St. Louis Cardinals.

Devin has been preaching since he was eight years old. He firmly believes that he was called by God to preach, and to train up other young men to answer that call as well.

THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL

DEVIN SWINDLE

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith"

(Romans 1.16-17)

These two verses are among the most familiar and most beloved in all of Scripture. These verses take us to the center of the gospel, and if they are not the theme verses of Paul's letter to the Romans, then they at least prepare the way for the theme. But as familiar as these words are, they can be just as difficult.

The reality is that almost every word or phrase of this passage is debated in terms of its meaning. Let me show you what I mean. Let's start with an easy one:

What does "to everyone" mean?

This is the one phrase about which there is no real debate. Whatever Paul is talking about in these verses applies to everyone—males and females, blacks and whites, Cardinals and Cubs, and especially Jews and Gentiles. Whatever truths are taught or promises promoted here are **universally applicable**. That means it applies to you. There are no exceptions.

So let's move on to a more difficult one. Paul says, **"For I am not ashamed of the gospel."** What does he mean by this?

Some folks think that Paul is just being rhetorical here, that by stating what he means in the *negative*, he's really emphasizing the *positive*. In other words, that he's "not ashamed" means that he's really proud. That's certainly possible. Paul talks about boasting in the Lord in other places (1 Corinthians 1.31; 2 Corinthians 10.17). But why contend that you're not ashamed unless there is, in fact, a *temptation to be* ashamed? Would Paul have any reasons to be ashamed of the gospel?

Maybe it's Rome. Paul might be intimidated by the prospects of delivering his message in the most powerful and pompous city in the world. From all accounts he was just the opposite of that—not much to look at, not much to listen to. Rome would eat him up.

I mean, how would you feel about standing on a street corner in Times Square telling everyone who walked by that they really need to listen to your story about a backwater peasant preacher...who was a Jew...who was executed as a criminal by the government...who you believe to be the Son of God and the Savior of the World. Okay, so maybe it's not the city.

Maybe it's the sermon. Maybe Paul was nervous about the message. I mean, who would believe—especially in Rome—that the true king was Jesus and not Caesar? "This is your king...a crucified country preacher who you think came back from the dead!" And who would believe—especially among the Jews—that this Jesus was God's Anointed One? "This is your Messiah...suffering servant, not conquering king!" To the Gentiles it would have sounded like **foolishness**, and to the Jews it would have been a **stumbling block** to say the least (1 Corinthians 1.23). And then, if he ever got to the part about faith and nothing else as the means by which this Jesus does his greatest work...I think I can understand the temptation to be ashamed...just a little bit.

But not Paul.

What others might perceive to be folly or blasphemy or weakness, Paul perceives to be the power of God. **“The gospel is the power of God for salvation,” Paul says.**

What is this, “power?”

It comes from the Greek word *dunamis*, from which we get our English words *dynamo* and *dynamite*. Far from being the shameful thing or the weak thing that the world might interpret it to be, the gospel of the crucified King is actually the dynamite that God uses to blow open the door of salvation. This event, this gospel, this death, burial, resurrection, and exaltation of God’s Son Jesus, is the dynamo that actually accomplishes the salvation of everyone who puts their trust in it. The gospel is the power for salvation.

Salvation is the desperate need of the whole world.

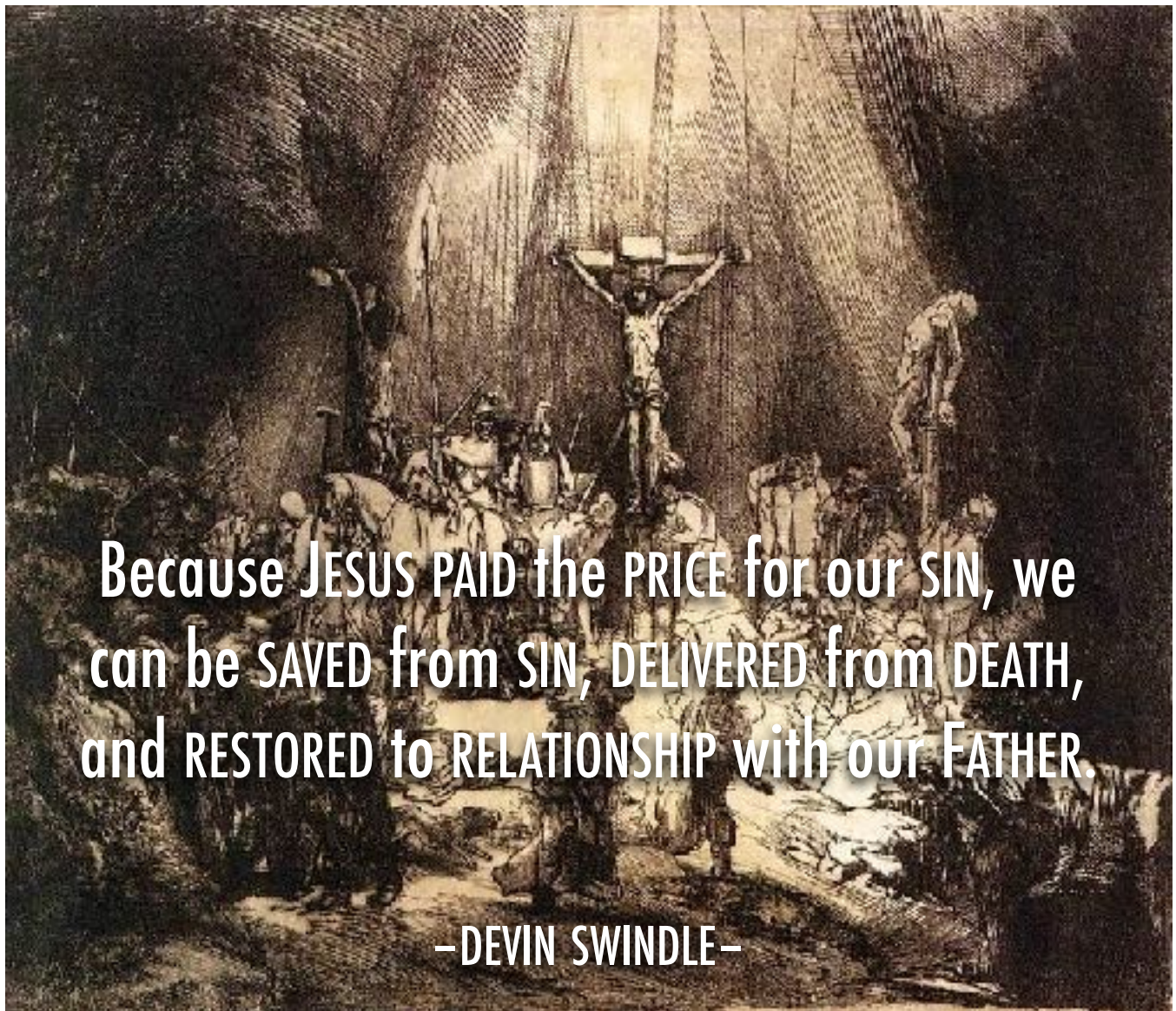
The world is lost, and it needs to be found; it needs to be saved. You see, the very first time that you and I—and everyone else—deviated from God’s design for us, our relationship with him was broken. When we sinned, we were separated from God. And cut off from the Giver of Life, we were condemned to death. Paul explains a little bit later on in this letter that the wages of sin is death (6.23). In other words, if you work for sin, you get paid in death. But our God—our Maker and our Father—because he loves us so much, initiated a plan to reconcile us—to bring us back—to himself. He initiated a plan by which the wages of our sin could be paid, and we could live.

The gospel is that plan.

The death, burial, resurrection, and exaltation of Jesus is that plan. Jesus died in our place; he got paid what we were owed because of our sin. And because the price was paid, we can be saved from sin, delivered from death, and restored to relationship with our Father. Our past can be justified. That is, we can be declared innocent of all

of our crimes. Our present can be sanctified. That is, we can be set apart for service to God, not service to sin. And our future can be glorified. That is, our salvation is not complete until God's work in the world is complete. We can be justified and sanctified in the here and now, but our glorification comes at the end. It's the already and the not yet. And all because of the gospel.

But how is all this accomplished? Well, look at verse 17: the gospel reveals the righteousness of God. Now this phrase is the most difficult in the passage.



What is Paul talking about, “the righteousness of God”?

It must be an important concept, because he refers to it eight times in Romans, and only one time outside of Romans.

Some people think Paul is talking about God’s righteousness. The gospel reveals God’s righteousness, or his justice. The idea here is that because God is right or just, he cannot overlook sin; he has to punish it. The penalty must be paid, and either we pay it or Jesus does. **So maybe the gospel reveals how God’s justice is carried out in Jesus.**

Others think that Paul is talking about righteousness from God. This is the way the NIV translates the phrase. The gospel reveals a righteousness that comes from God. The idea here is that our status before God is that of condemned sinner. We have sinned, and we deserve death. But Jesus takes our place. He takes our punishment. He pays the penalty for our sin. And so when the price is paid, God declares us to be righteous. **So maybe the gospel reveals how our righteousness is a gift from God that we did not deserve.**

Still others think that Paul is talking about righteousness that is done by God. This interpretation is based on several Old Testament passages—especially in Isaiah—in which God’s righteousness is parallel to God’s salvation. God’s *righteousness* is equal to his *salvation*. Salvation is a covenant promise that God has made to his people. So when God saves his people he is being faithful to his promises. **So maybe the gospel reveals what God has done to save us, upholding his promises to us.**

So how does the gospel work, how does it reveal the righteousness of God? I think the answer’s obvious and glorious. The gospel reveals how God’s personal righteousness is upheld—**Jesus paid the penalty for sin.** The gospel also reveals how we are declared to be righteous before God—**Jesus paid the penalty for our sin.** And

the gospel reveals how God has kept his promise to save his people and set the world right—**God sent Jesus to pay the penalty for sin.** And I think it's that faithfulness to which Paul alludes in the next line, "...from faith for faith."

The saving events of the gospel proceed *from God* as the ultimate demonstration of his faithfulness to his creation. And the only appropriate response of creation is faith in those saving acts and faithfulness *in response to* those saving acts. As it is written, "The righteous shall live by faith."

By whose faith do we live? By God's? Absolutely! The only hope for a sinful and separated humanity is God's faithfulness to us. But what about our faith? Yes, ours, too. Our hope is built on the foundation of God's faithfulness, and because of his faithfulness to us, we render faithful obedience to him. The gospel is both something that we *trust* and something that we *obey*.

We trust that God has done and will do all that he has promised. And because we trust him, we obey him. Paul calls this the "obedience of faith" in verse 5.

Have you accepted the free gift of salvation that God has offered you through the work of his Son Jesus? Are you living faithfully in response to that free gift? There is no other response:

Jesus paid it all
All to him [we] owe
Sin had left a crimson stain
He washed it white as snow.

This is the heart of the gospel.



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He is married to Karina, and they have one daughter with a son on the way. Tye has a heart to live into Jesus' example of mentoring others and declaring the Kingdom of Heaven in Christ alone.

THE BAD NEWS ABOUT THE GOOD NEWS

TYE ZOLA

Perspective

The way you view the world is everything. Let's be honest, your viewpoint changes often. Most of the time this change is a result of others influence on you, some for good and some for bad. But the truth is you can have a hope of setting the foundations of your perspective from which you can see the world from a better view.

For example, how fast are you moving right now? From a close perspective, defined by the parameters of this room, most of us are not moving at all or only moving less than one mile an hour.

If we change our perspective and view our movement in relationship to the Earth, we are moving somewhere near 800 miles per hour. Of course this is affected by where you are on the Earth. If you are on the true North or South Pole, you are merely spinning around at a rate of one turn for every 23 hours 56 minutes and 4 seconds. But, if you are on the equator, you are moving with a tangential speed of 1,040 miles per hour. If the earth stopped spinning abruptly, you and everything else would be launched as fast as a 22 LR rifle bullet.

If we continue to broaden our perspective, let's say from a position over the sun, things would change even greater. Earth is currently

traveling around the sun at a radial speed of 67,000 miles per hour. That's fast!

If we broaden our perspective even more we will find that the solar system is also moving around the Milky Way galaxy at 45,000 miles per hour and is moving out from the center of the galaxy at a speed of almost 16,000 miles per hour.

Perspective is everything. The more you know of the truth, the more you are aware of the complexity of God's creation and His work in it. You don't need to know everything to live a full and good life, but knowledge of what all is going on does help you live with better perspective, and with hope or fear.

Faith

The bible teaches that faith is the assurance or hope of things unseen, and that Jesus is the author and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 11.1, 12.1-2).

The hard thing about faith is that it involves hope in what is unseen. But this does not mean that we do not have knowledge of the truth. As the writer of Hebrews likes to note, Jesus is a revelation of the truth to the things that were merely a shadow (Hebrews 8.5, 10.1).

So, one of the hard parts of the good news of Jesus is that all are not aware or believe Him when He shares a greater perspective. We could even say, some take His perspective as bad news and struggle with dealing with it. In Mark 3.31-35, Jesus' family doesn't get it, and this is following a discussion of blasphemy. In John 7.1-9, Jesus' brothers still don't understand what he is about. In other places, Jesus' own disciples don't understand the perspective he is offering either, at least not immediately (John 2.18-22; Matthew 16.13-23).

The bad news of the good news is that you must fully commit to a reality, a perspective, that has been shared by Jesus. It takes faith and trusting of who Jesus says he was.

This is the truth of John 9.

In John 9 was the blind man born blind because of sin? Or was he born blind that the works of God might be displayed in him (John 9.3)?

Outside of the temple, somewhere in Jerusalem (John 8.59) Jesus' disciples see a man who was born blind. They ask the question about what was a common thought of those days. If someone was handicapped or had an illness, it was because of sin. They had a very poor understanding of God's teachings to Job, when he and his friends question why bad things happen. So, Jesus lives into this misunderstanding, this poor and broken perspective of reality, in an amazing way. He heals the man of his blindness by spitting on the ground and making mud, then placing it on his eyes. Jesus then instructs the man to wash in the pool of Siloam. Once his eyes are clean, they are open! He can see! But, Jesus isn't done fully opening his eyes.

The man, who can now see, is recognized by many people who are amazed, and cannot believe what they are seeing. He tells his story at least three times. Each time



you can notice his eyes (faith) become more and more open. He becomes so convinced that he was healed by someone great, possibly the Messiah, that he calls out the religious leaders for their lack of vision (see John 9.25-27, 30-33).

We can see in John 9.35-41 that Jesus has *fully* opened the blind man's eyes. In 9.38 he exclaims, "Lord, I believe!"

Within this, Jesus reveals a troubling truth that there are people who are blind because of their unwillingness to accept that they are blind (John 9.39).

The bad news of the gospel is that there are people who do not accept the perspective/reality that Jesus is and shares. The good news is that Jesus is the revelation of a better perspective because He is from the Father (John 14-17) and shares everything we need to see a better understanding of reality.

The good news of the gospel is that the death, burial, and resurrection leads us to have our eyes open to walk in a newness of life if we follow Jesus!



APPENDIX: STUDENT TWEETS AND RESPONSES

The 2016 Deeper Youth Conference was all about getting our students to understand what the gospel is, and how it is good news to the world, and to help with that process, we encouraged them to text or tweet messages of what they learned throughout the weekend.

Student Responses

- *The gospel is the good news of Jesus Christ.*
- *The gospel can change a life in a moment!*
- *This is awesome! What is gospel to me?*
- *Thank you for the good news that brings us treasure.*
- *What one person considers trash is another person's treasure.*
- *A lot of times you only have 30-45 seconds to share the gospel with somebody.*
- *What would you say if you only had 30-45 seconds?*
- *By the end of this conference, we'll know a lot more about the Bible than coming in.*
- *Take advantage of every opportunity you get to spend 30-45 seconds sharing the gospel to someone in this desperate world. You could be the only Bible that person will ever read.*
- *Early Christians would take abandoned infants and raise them as their own. Should we not also take in the lost and guide them home?*
- *Christianity has given life to those who were destined to have none.*

- *Sin is a pest. It affects us personally, it affects the earth, it affects social life, and it affects our relationship with God.*
- *Christians helped take out slavery.*
- *God gives and God takes away.*
- *God redeems us in Jesus by the power of the Holy Spirit!*
- *The whole point of the Book of Acts: we are filled and empowered with the Holy Spirit.*
- *Even though the gospels have their differences, they are all true! They are just from different perspectives!*
- *The blind beggar experienced Jesus' power when He rubbed the mud on his eyes and told him to wash off in the lake of Siloam which allowed him to see! He shared the good news! He sowed the seeds to everyone including the Sanhedrin even though the seeds were choked out. The beggar had a different perspective because of Jesus!*
- *If this is your land, where are your stories? We should have our own stories of how God has changed our lives.*
- *Before Christ I was a rude mean girl and after Christ I try to be as positive as I can and as nice as I can. It has changed my life and I'm forever grateful!*
- *Before Christ I was self-conscious, after Christ I am confident.*
- *We should all have a story.*
- *Our story should have a "Before" and an "After".*
- *You gotta have A story before you begin to share THE story.*
- *When Jesus transforms our life and makes it better, we will want to share it with others and make their life better and transform them too.*
- *One does not share the good news until they have experienced the good news in their life.*
- *The Gospel is about redemption.*
- *With social media we can proclaim Him more than ever.*
- *#thereispowerintheblood*

- *As Christians we are called to be upset about injustice.*
- *The Good News in time of tragedy is that what is sown perishable is reaped imperishable.*
- *Sin is not a boo boo. It is cancer.*
- *When Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil, God's good creation started to break.*
- *The Gospel is Good News because it signals the death of death.*
- *This is a day of Good News and we are keeping it to ourselves. 2 Kings 7:9*
- *Christians are called to make themselves uncomfortable to serve God*
- *Christianity has got to reveal itself in how we treat other people.*



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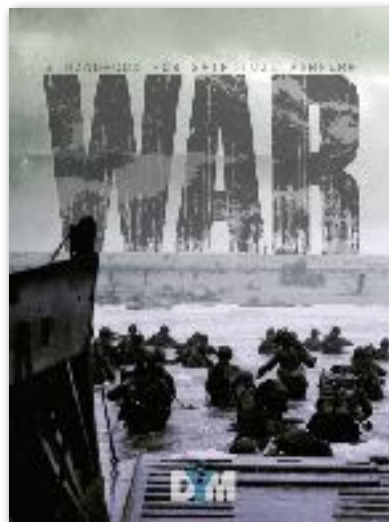
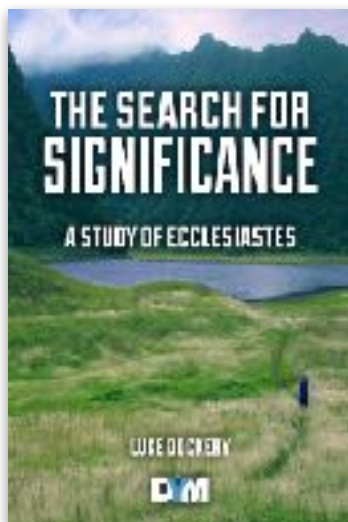
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