

# 1. GOSPEL POWER & PURPOSE

## THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GOSPEL

### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What would you say is the primary message of Christianity? What do you think Christianity is all about?

### THE IMPORTANCE OF THE GOSPEL

The heart of Christianity is the Gospel. Gospel means "good news" and was a word used by Jesus and the early church to describe the core content of Christianity.

When people think about Christianity many things come to mind, but the message of the gospel is rarely the first thing. And yet, the Bible says that the gospel is "of first importance." If there is one thing about Christianity that is important to understand, either for Christians or people exploring Christianity, it is the message of the gospel.

### THE GOSPEL IS PRIMARY:

*For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, (1 Corinthians 15:3 ESV)*

### THE GOSPEL IS POWERFUL:

*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. (Romans 1:16 ESV)*

### THE GOSPEL IS PROFOUND:

*It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (1 Peter 1:12 ESV)*

"If there's anything in life that we should be passionate about, it's the gospel. And I don't mean passionate only about sharing it with others. I mean passionate about thinking about it, dwelling on it, rejoicing in it, allowing it to color the way we look at the world. Only one thing can be of first importance to each of us. And only the gospel ought to be." -C.J. Mahaney

### THE ORIGINS OF THE WORD 'GOSPEL'

In the Roman world, "gospel" - meaning "good news" - was a term applied to any historical event of such significance that it actually changed the course of history for those to whom it was proclaimed. For example, the birth of Caesar Augustus was "gospel" because his birth promised a new era of prosperity and the blessing of the gods for the whole Roman world. The early Christians used the word, to sum up, the central message about Jesus.

Dr. Martyn Lloyd-Jones explains that when a king went to war and lost, he would immediately send generals throughout the cities and villages to prepare the common people for war. Because the battle had been lost, the enemy would advance to take the people captive, and if anyone wanted to live they were going to need to fight for their lives. Their livelihood, their hope, and their future were, essentially, in their own hands.

On the other hand, Lloyd-Jones says, when the king won a great victory on the front lines, he would send messengers to proclaim the good news throughout the cities and villages of the Empire. These men were not generals telling the people to prepare for battle; rather, they were messengers (evangelists!) carrying the good news message (gospel!) that the livelihood, hope, and future of the people had been secured on their behalf by the king, though they themselves had not lifted a finger!

Let's assume you know nothing about the content of the gospel in Christianity. Based solely on the historical use of the word, what are some assumptions you can make about what the gospel is and what it is not?

Lloyd-Jones goes on to say that the difference between sending generals and sending messengers is the difference between religion and the gospel message.

THE GOSPEL	RELIGION
News about what Jesus has done for us	Instructions about what we must do for God
Elicits joy and gratitude	Elicits fear and stress
Sends messengers who spread the good news that our lives are now safe because of King Jesus' victory	Sends commanders who tell people they must fight for themselves if they want to save their lives

## GOOD NEWS FROM GOD'S WORD | THE MESSAGE OF THE GOSPEL

### SCRIPTURES ON THE GOSPEL

To understand the message of the gospel, the best place to begin is the Bible itself. Below each of the following scriptures write down 2-3 key points that summarize that passage. Don't be surprised if the same key points continue to emerge. See if you can answer these questions from each verse: 1) Who is God? 2) What has He done? 3) Who am I? 4) If I believed this, how would I then live?

John 3:16-17 ESV

*"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life. (17) For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."*

Romans 3:23-24 ESV

*"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified [made right] by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus"*

Ephesians 2:8-9 ESV

*"For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast."*

### GOOD NEWS FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

The gospel makes Christianity unique among all religions. Some people say that all religions basically teach the same thing, but those people have never studied religions closely. While there are some similarities among religions, the message of the gospel makes Christianity fundamentally different. Anyone whose life is shaped by the truth of the gospel, as opposed to religion, will have completely different motives, relationships, emotions, and behaviors. But what has Jesus done on my behalf? And how does that make Gospel Christianity different?

First, Jesus lived a life of perfect obedience to God. In every way, he was perfectly pleasing to God, absolutely faithful, and entirely obedient. When I put faith in him, I'm asking God to deal with me not according to my performance in life but according to Jesus' performance on my behalf. We are fundamentally shifting our sense of worth and identity from ourselves and our life record to him and his life record. When that happens, God no longer considers me a rebel against Him but treats me as a "dearly beloved son." Our experience of this incredible truth leads to deep, humble gratitude and a zealous desire to flee from sin because it is incompatible with who we are in Christ.

Second, Jesus died as a perfect substitute, taking the just penalty against my sin. Jesus drank the cup of God's wrath against me and my sin to the very last drop; there is none left for me when I place my faith in Him. God the Father turned his back on his own Son so that he could turn his face toward rebels like me. I recognize that my sin put Jesus on the cross, and that humbles me, but I also recognize that he freely chose to go to the cross for me, and that reality energizes me to live faithfully before him. This is why Paul says in, *"Romans 8:1 ESV There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus."* We are no longer guilty before God; we have been "justified" or made right with him and we have peace with him. Our moral failure does not hinder our relationship with God.

Third, Jesus rose from the dead and defeated sin, death, and hell. Jesus is alive today and promises to take control of my heart and life, actually living in me by his Spirit. When Jesus ascended to the right hand of the Father, he sent the Holy Spirit to live in us, empowering us for growth in character, gifting us for ministry in the world, and leading us into all truth. By faith in Him, I can walk in consistent victory over my sin, the patterns of sin in the world, and Satan's work. Additionally, Because Jesus is sitting at the right hand of the Father, I can be certain that God's love towards me will never change, and one day Jesus will return to re-make the world as he intended it to be in the beginning, set all things right, and bring me to be with him for eternity.

Christians, then, are not primarily a group of people who all believe the same things and perform certain rituals and religious observances. The radical claim of the New Testament - and of Jesus himself - is that Christians are new people, a new humanity, created in and through the work of Jesus Christ. Our sin has been forgiven because of Jesus, God treats us as beloved children because of Jesus, the Spirit of God comes to take up residence in our hearts, and we have a secure future. We are not who we used to be; rather, we are "in Christ": all that belongs to Jesus is ours, our past is gone, our identity today is in Him, & our future is life in God's kingdom with God forever!

The Gospel is the dynamic power of the Christian life, leading to delight in God and heart-level obedience to his ways. Consider the following contrasts between Religion and the Gospel (adapted from Dr. Timothy Keller):

In Religion, we obey in order to be accepted by God, fearing what he might do if we're disobedient. The Gospel motivates us to obedient Christian living by telling us that because of Jesus we are already accepted, that the judgment against our sin has fallen on Jesus, and that there is no guilt or condemnation left for us.

In Religion, I obey in order to get things from God, often making promises about what I will do or how I will change. The Gospel tells me what God has done for me, and his grace teaches me to obey out of joyful gratitude for all that he has already given me. I obey to enjoy God.

In Religion, my identity and self-worth are based on what I can accomplish, on how hard I work, or on how moral I am. Therefore, I look down on others who aren't as moral or obedient as me. But in the Gospel, my identity and self-worth are based on God's love for me in Jesus, even while I was his enemy, unable to accomplish or earn his love by my actions. Therefore, I can't look down on someone different than me because I am no better than they are - and probably worse.

### THE GOSPEL CHANGES EVERYTHING!

We believe that the Gospel separates Christianity from any and every other religion. On one hand, the Gospel teaches us that we are so bad Jesus had to die for us. It absolutely humbles us because it teaches that our sin is offensive to a holy and just God - and our sin is worse than we know or would ever dare admit. On the other hand, the Gospel lifts us up and causes us to rejoice because it says that we are so loved by God that Jesus delighted to die for us. It was God's plan to rescue us by sacrificing his own Son, and in doing so God brings us great joy and himself great glory.

As Christians, we want to remember, rejoice in, and live out of what God has done for us in Jesus. This means both a growing awareness of our sinfulness (leading to deeper humility) and a growing awareness of how good and gracious God is toward us (leading to greater confidence).

Here's the point: We don't ever move past the Gospel. Where we begin is where we stay. True Christianity always springs from growing Gospel-centeredness in our lives. We are to grow in grace each day, to more fully work the reality of what God has done for us - the Gospel - into the everyday parts of our lives.

Christianity is fundamentally about learning how to live as a new person in Christ, where your heart is set on Jesus Christ and your life is the overflow of your joy in God.

As one author has said, it's about "doing everyday things with Gospel intentionality."

### RELIGION VS THE GOSPEL

	RELIGION	GOSPEL
PRIMARY MESSAGE	Salvation is earned based on what you do for God.	Salvation is a free gift based on what God has done for you.
OBEDIENCE	I begrudgingly obey God because I have to earn his acceptance. I resent God.	I gladly obey God because I have freely received his acceptance. I delight in honoring God.
RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD	I am always uncertain about my right standing before God because I never know if I have done enough to please God. The result is anxiety and insecurity. I fear God.	I am always certain of my right standing before God because Jesus has already done enough for God to be pleased with me. The result is peace and security. I love God.
VIEW OF SELF	My self-view is constantly changing because it is based on how well I do at any given moment. When I do poorly I am despondent. When I do well I am prideful.	My self-view stays grounded in the fact that my value is based on what Jesus has already done for me. When I do poorly I am humbled because I'm reminded of my need for a savior, but I am not despondent because I have an all-sufficient Savior. When I do well I am grateful because God is at work in my life, but I am not prideful because it is more God's work than my work.
VIEW OF OTHERS	Since my identity is based on what I accomplish and how moral I am, I judge people who are 'worse' than me and am jealous of people who are 'better' than me.	Since my identity is based on what Jesus accomplished for me and how moral he was, I sympathize with people who are 'worse' than me because I need a savior just as much as they do, and I celebrate those who are 'better' than me because their lives honor the savior I love.

### THINK & APPLY:

1) Having read through the chart, what 'religious' characteristics do you see in yourself? (Note: you don't have to ascribe to any religion to have these characteristics. Most people, religious or not, base their identity on what they do.)

2) What characteristics of a gospel-shaped life are most appealing to you?

3) How would living for the Gospel change your thinking? Be specific!

### QUOTATIONS ABOUT THE GOSPEL

Below are quotations about the gospel by people who have studied its message for many years.

"The gospel is the word about Jesus Christ and what he did for us in order to restore us to a right relationship with God." -Graeme Goldsworthy

"The gospel is the announcement that God has reconciled us to Himself by sending His Son Jesus to die as a substitute for our sins, and that all who repent and believe have eternal life in Him." -J.D. Greer

"The Gospel is the news that Jesus Christ, the Righteous One, died for our sins and rose again, eternally triumphant over all his enemies, so that there is now no condemnation for those who believe, but only everlasting joy." -John Piper

"Through the person and work of Jesus Christ, God fully accomplishes salvation for us, rescuing us from judgment for sin into fellowship with him, and then restores the creation in which we can enjoy our new life together with him forever." -Tim Keller

### Respond to the Gospel

1) Based on the key points from the scriptures and the definitions above, write down several summary statements that capture the message of the gospel.

2) Now in 1-3 sentences, using your own words, answer the question: What is the gospel message?

REFLECTION: If being a Christian is about not just believing in Jesus but about rejoicing in his work; not just about going to church but about finding your identity in being a beloved child of God; and not just about doing the right things but about living from the overflow of joy in Jesus; would you say that you are a Christian? Why or why not?

## 2. GOSPEL POWER & PURPOSE

### THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL - PART 1 (PAST)

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What are a few ways you define yourself? What are a few things you look to for a sense of worth or significance?

#### THE GOSPEL IN THREE STATEMENTS

Over the next three lessons, we will examine the message of the gospel in greater detail, as well as some of its implications for everyday life. We can divide the message of the gospel into three statements which focus on what Jesus has done for us. Remember: the gospel is the message or "good news" about what has been accomplished on our behalf, though we've done nothing to earn or merit it. Rather, through faith in Jesus Christ, (that is, by trusting our lives to his work on our behalf) we receive the following benefits:

1. We have been saved from the penalty of sin because of Jesus' life and death. (Past)
2. We are being saved from the power of sin because of Jesus' resurrection and ascension. (Present)
3. We will be saved from the presence of sin because of Jesus' return. (Future)

1) What is common among each of these statements?

2) What is different in each of these statements?

#### YOUR RESUME, YOUR RIGHTEOUSNESS

Most of us have been to job interviews. When you go to a job interview you bring your resume. Your resume lists all the reasons the company should hire you. It is a list of your accomplishments and qualifications. If your resume is good enough, you may get the job. If not, you won't get the job. Of course, a company not only looks at your resume. They also look at your rap sheet. They do a background check with the police, but may also look for red flags by contacting references and previous employers. If your rap sheet is clear enough you may get hired.

One day we will each have an interview with God. We will hand him a resume and rap sheet. In biblical terms, our resume and rap sheet is our righteousness. Our righteousness (sometimes called a righteousness 'of God' or 'from God') is our standing before him based on the quality of our life. We have all of our accomplishments and qualities on our resume. We also have all the ways we have fallen short of God's perfect standard on our rap sheet. Together they are our righteousness. If you were to compare your life resume-the one you will hand to God-to other people, how do you think you will measure up?

Most of us would probably say we land somewhere between Hitler and Mother Theresa. If you are like me, you are pretty good at noticing lots of reasons why your status should be shifted up the scale, and ignoring the reasons why your status should be shifted down. Just like a resume we would construct for a job interview is skillfully skewed from reality, we are pretty good at painting a better picture of ourselves than is a reality.

Adolf Eichman was the mastermind of the "final solution," the Nazi plan to exterminate the Jews. He committed shocking crimes against humanity. And yet, his captor, Peter Malkin, and the journalists who observed his trial were shocked by two things. Firstly, they were surprised by how ordinary he seemed. They expected a monster. But he looked like every other man. Secondly, they were amazed by his capacity to justify his behavior. He easily excused his murderous life. In his own eyes, he was a decent man and probably would not have ranked himself low on the scale of good and bad people.

Adolf Eichman's story illustrates an important truth about humanity: even the worst people can justify themselves to themselves. But there is another important truth about humanity: even the best people cannot justify themselves to God.

The scale on which our righteousness is measured does not have Mother Theresa at the top. God is at the top. His perfect resume and perfect rap sheet are at the top. And that throws the curve.

There was a guy named Isaiah who was God's spokesperson in Israel. He was the kind of guy whose holiness was off the charts. Mother Theresa would have put him at the top of her chart. If you were in a waiting room with Isaiah and all of your friends and someone had to be selected to go before God, everyone would have chosen Isaiah, including you. He was off the charts when it came to holiness.

And yet, when Isaiah went before God, his holiness didn't come close to God's. In Isaiah 6, he records a vision in which he is taken to the throne room of God and his response is: *"Woe is me! For I am lost; for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!" (Isa 6:5 ESV)*

In other words, he was so overcome by the contrast between God and him that he called down a curse on himself. He doesn't even bother to wait for God to do it. He says, "Woe is me!" Why? He says, "I am a man of unclean lips who lives among a people of unclean lips." Unclean lips? He was God's chosen mouthpiece! But in the presence of God, the contrast was overwhelming. Not even Isaiah could stand before God with his rap sheet and resume expecting anything other than death. If Isaiah couldn't, what about you? Even the worst people can justify themselves to themselves. But even the best people cannot justify themselves to God.

If we have to stand before God with our resume and rap sheet, we don't stand a chance. Our righteousness is not sufficient. That is the clear message of the Bible.

But there is another message that is good news: there is perfect righteousness we have not earned that God will freely give to us. He will allow us to trade in our insufficient resume and rap sheet, and receive a perfect resume and rap sheet--the one that belongs to Jesus. We can either stand before God with ours or with his. We can either put our faith in what we have done, or we can put our faith in what he has done.

The good news, the gospel, is that our standing with God no longer needs to be based on what we have done, but can be based on what Jesus has done. That means that salvation--this right standing with God--is freely available to all. We only need to stop trusting in our own righteousness for our standing with God and start trusting in Jesus' righteousness.

The bad news is that your resume simply isn't good enough to earn a right standing with God. You have no hope of being saved based on what you have done. But here is the good news: God loves you so much that he sent his Son, Jesus, to live the perfect life you don't live and then pay the penalty for your sin. By trusting in Jesus rather than yourself, you can receive salvation as a free gift! God offers you this gift because he loves you and wants you to be in a relationship with him now and forever. Because of Jesus' perfect performance, you can be unconditionally accepted by God. You simply need to humble yourself, set aside your resume, and thank Jesus for his.

The message of Christianity is that we are more sinful than we ever realized, but we are more loved and accepted than we ever could have imagined, thanks to what Jesus has done for us.

### GOOD NEWS FROM GOD'S WORD

Through faith, we have been saved from the penalty of sin because of Jesus' life and death. (Past Tense)

#### THE BAD NEWS ABOUT OUR RESUME

*Romans 3:9-10, 20 ESV*

*"all, both Jews and Greeks, are under sin, as it is written: "None is righteous, no, not one...<sup>20</sup>For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight..."*

- 3) According to these verses, what is the bad news about the resume that you have been developing--the one based on works of the law' or your obedience to God?

#### THE GOOD NEWS ABOUT JESUS' PERFECT RESUME

*Romans 3:21-25 ESV* *"But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it-<sup>22</sup>the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction:<sup>23</sup>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,<sup>24</sup>and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus,<sup>25</sup>whom God put forward as a propitiation (sacrifice of atonement) by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins."*

- 4) According to vs 23 is anyone's personal resume good enough? Why? What is the standard?
- 5) What is the good news according to vs 24?
- 6) According to vs 22 & 25, how do you get this perfect resume that is now available?
- 7) When you have a bad rap sheet, you pay a penalty with prison time and financial restitution. Romans 6:23 says the penalty for our sin is death: *"For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."* According to Romans 3:24-25, how was our penalty paid off? How is it received?

## THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS' LIFE

Jesus always did what was good, right and perfect. He honored God and loved people with every thought, word, and deed. He was impeccable *{blameless w/o possibility of sin}*. He had the perfect resume! He lived a perfect life, and by faith in Him we can be "credited" his perfection, and God will treat us based on His perfect life and not on our failure.

## THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS' DEATH

As perfect as Jesus was, he died on the cross. The penalty for sin is death, but Jesus never sinned! So why did he die?

The Bible tells us that he was paying the penalty for our rap sheet. He was willingly taking our punishment for us. And when we put our trust--not in ourselves and what we have done--but in what Jesus has done for us, our rap sheet is cleared and his resume becomes ours. An exchange takes place.

In 2 Corinthians 5:21 we are told, *"For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*

8) According to 2 Corinthians 5:21, what is the exchange that takes place?

9) Imagine the opportunity to stand before God and hand in Jesus' resume. Would you like to do that one day? If so, you can say to Jesus, "Thank you for living the perfect life that I haven't lived, and thank you for paying the penalty for all the ways that I have fallen short of God's standards. I no longer want to rely on what I have done for my standing with God. I put my trust in you and what you did for me."

The Bad News: I am so sinful that Jesus had to die for me.

The Good News: I am so loved that Jesus was glad to die for me.

Are you resting in faith in this amazing truth of the Gospel? In what ways does your life show it? Not show it?

## GOOD NEWS FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

Many of us have an internal drive to prove ourselves to ourselves, to others, and even to God. We approach tasks like a test that will either build our resume or lengthen our rap sheet. We approach encounters like we would a job interview, trying to make ourselves appear better than we actually are. The author Donald Miller said we live our lives like we are in a life raft that holds 15 people, but 16 are in the raft. Someone has to go and so we are bound and determined to prove that we deserve to stay. This drive to prove ourselves leads to all kinds of problems: stress, anger, jealousy, lying, debt, fear, to name just a few.

But the message of the gospel is that we have nothing to prove and no need to pretend. We have nothing to prove because we will pass the greatest job interview--the one with God--with flying colors because of Jesus. We have no need to pretend because God has loved us at our very worst and all of our sins are forgiven sins. Nothing to prove. No need to pretend. That is good news right now!

RELIGION	GOSPEL
My identity is based on what I do for God.	My identity is based on what God has done for me in Jesus.
I feel the need to prove myself to God and others because my acceptance is based on my good performance. I am constantly under pressure.	I don't have to prove myself to God or others because my acceptance is based on Jesus' good performance. The pressure is off.
I have to pretend that I am better than I really am. I try to hide my faults and failures because every sin condemns me.	I am free to be myself with all of my faults and failures. I don't have to hide because all of my sins are forgiven sin.

### NOTHING TO PROVE

Read through the list below and identify the ways that you try to prove yourself in order to earn the acceptance of others, God, or even yourself. Be Specific!

#### WORK

I work harder than others so I am better than them. I talk about how busy I am so that others will realize that I am important. When work is slow, I am laid off, or even when I have a day off, I look down on myself. The pressure I feel to achieve in this area is costing me in the area of relationships.

#### PARENTING

I do everything I can to give my kids an edge. I get them the best academic support and have them in all the right sports and extracurricular activities. When they don't succeed or when they misbehave, I am embarrassed. I suspect that they feel an unhealthy amount of pressure from me.

#### INTELLIGENCE

In a conversation, I try to demonstrate my knowledge on a broad array of topics and drop hints about how well-read I am. If possible, I reference my academic record. I like to be right when there is a disagreement about the facts. As a result, others perceive me as arrogant.

#### APPEARANCE

I am often tempted to buy brand name fashion because it makes me feel more valuable and is noticed by others. I don't exercise and eat well just to be healthy but to be admired by others. I catch myself looking in the mirror a lot. I live with a sense of never being beautiful or handsome enough.

#### WEALTH

I subtly show off my latest purchase and feel pride when I have a new luxury item. I feel the need to be perceived as financially secure, even wealthy. As a result, I am not nearly as generous as I could be. And when we are struggling financially I try to hide it.

#### BEHAVIOR

I don't drink, cuss, chew, or go with girls who do. On the one hand, I judge others when they don't measure up. On the other hand, I condemn myself when I slip up. It is a constant comparison game that hurts me and others.

#### TALENT

I try to excel in as many activities as possible because I feel the need to show others and myself that I am gifted and talented. I hate losing and consider second- best to be a failure. It is hard for me to have fun because I am so concerned about performing.

- 10) What are some of the negative consequences that you have experienced by feeling the need to prove yourself?
  
- 11) What difference would it make in your life if you were absolutely convinced that God accepted you as you just as you are? How would it impact your ability to love others?

#### NO NEED TO PRETEND IN THE GOSPEL!

Pretending is really the flip side of proving ourselves. Life feels like a job interview and we need to hide our weaknesses. Read through the list below and identify ways that you sometimes pretend in order to make your "resume" appear better than it actually is.

#### DEFENDING

I am defensive when I feel criticized. When confronted, my tendency is to explain things away or justify my actions. As a result, people are hesitant to approach me with concerns, and it is hard for me to change.

#### FAKING

I try to keep up appearances so people think the best of me. Being with others can often be exhausting because I am working so hard to say and do the right things. Few people know the real me.

#### HIDING

I do my best to hide anything that would make others think less of me. I am afraid that if people knew the real me, they wouldn't accept me.

### EXAGGERATING

I tend to exaggerate both good and bad events in order to draw attention to myself. If there is something good that I have done, I highlight it for others and stretch the truth.

### BLAMING

I am quick to blame others for sin or circumstances. I have a difficult time owning my contribution to sin or conflict. My pride leads me to assume I am not at fault and my fear leads me to cover up my fault.

### DOWNPLAYING

I tend to downplay the significance of my sin and mistakes. I dismiss them as insignificant. Rather than seeking forgiveness from God and others, they build up and end up causing more damage.

- 12) Which area of pretending do you struggle with the most? How does it negatively affect your life and relationships?
  
- 13) How could this area of struggle be altered if you believed that you were unconditionally accepted by God--if you believed the gospel: that through faith, you have been set free from the penalty of sin through the life and death of Jesus?

### REFLECTION:

This week look for a moment when you are responding by Proving or Pretending. What are you forgetting about the gospel? About what God has done for you in Jesus?

Turn to the truth of the gospel that you studied today--that your identity is based on how perfect Jesus is, not on how perfect you are. Thank God for loving you and being gracious to you. Ask him to help you respond differently at that moment.

Record ways in which you respond by Proving or Pretending and report back.

### 3. GOSPEL POWER & PURPOSE

#### THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL - PART 2 (PRESENT)

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

Describe a time when you tried to change. Maybe you were trying to end a bad habit or start a good habit. What was your motivation to change in that circumstance?

#### THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL TO CHANGE US

In the last lesson, we learned that Jesus lived a perfect life and then died to pay the penalty for our sin. He was perfectly righteous and then died for our unrighteousness. But Jesus did not stay dead. He rose from the grave and then ascended into heaven. Not only is Jesus' life and death good news for us, but so is his resurrection and ascension.

In this lesson, we will look at the truth that: Through faith, we are being set free from the power of sin because of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. We will not be fully set free from the power of sin in this life, but the Holy Spirit enables us to increasingly grow in likeness to Jesus Christ.

Religion can tell you what to do--namely, to "love God with all your heart, soul & mind" & "to love your neighbor as yourself"; but the gospel alone gives you the power to do it." -J.D. Greer

- 1) According to the two statements below, what has been fully accomplished for those with faith in Jesus, and what is still in the process of being accomplished?
  - We have been saved from the penalty of sin because of Jesus' life and death.
  - We are being set free from the power of sin because of the resurrection and ascension of Jesus

The Gospel is not just what we preach to unbelievers in order to get them "saved" from the penalty of sin. The Gospel is much more than that! The Good News is that Christ not only saves us from sin's guilt but also delivers us from its slavery. The Gospel is the principal energizing and driving force for living the whole Christian life. The Gospel is not just for non-Christians. It is also for Christians "

-John Fonville

#### GOOD NEWS FROM GOD'S WORD

Through Faith, we are being set free from the power of sin because of Jesus' resurrection and ascension.

#### THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS' RESURRECTION AND ASCENSION

Read through the passages below and consider the value of Jesus' resurrection and ascension for us today.

Referring to the resurrection, Paul writes:

*"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." - 1 Corinthians 15:55-57 ESV*

Referring to the resurrection, Paul prays that the Ephesians would know:

*"and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might that he worked in Christ when he raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come." -Ephesians 1:19-21 ESV*

Referring to his ascension, Jesus says to his disciples:

*"Nevertheless, I tell you the truth: it is to your advantage that I go away, for if I do not go away, the Helper will not come to you. But if I go, I will send him to you." - John 16:7 ESV*

- 2) According to these passages, what are some of the reasons that Jesus' resurrection and ascension are good news for everyday life?

#### THE HOLY SPIRIT: A NEW POWER TO CHANGE

We each experience conflicting desires. We want to be kind, humble, and generous, BUT often we end up being rude, arrogant, and stingy. We want to do what is best for our family, BUT at the moment, we end up doing what is best for ourselves. It is a struggle. We are all under the influence of the power of sin.

- 3) What is one thing you did this week that you wish you hadn't? What were some of the consequences for you and for those around you?

The good news is that the power of the Holy Spirit is far stronger than the power of sin in our lives. Through trust in Jesus, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who gives us a new ability to change.

*Romans 8:9-11 ESV*

*"You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact, the Spirit of God dwells in you. Anyone who does not have the Spirit of Christ does not belong to him. But if Christ is in you, although the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness. If the Spirit of him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, he who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through his Spirit who dwells in you."*

2 Timothy 1:7 ESV

"for God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control."

2 Peter 1:3-4 ESV

"His divine power has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence, by which he has granted to us his precious and very great promises, so that through them you may become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped from the corruption that is in the world because of sinful desire."

- 4) Where do we receive the power to live a life that honors God?
  
- 5) According to these verses, is there enough power to change anyone's life, even your own? How great is the power of the Holy Spirit?
  
- 6) Why do we sometimes think that there is not enough power to change?

#### THE GOSPEL: A NEW MOTIVATION TO CHANGE

The Holy Spirit gives us a new power to change. The gospel gives us new motivation to change.

- Often times we want to change so that we will look better in our own eyes, others' eyes, or God's eyes – we want to prove ourselves.
- Other times we want to change in order to avoid the guilt and shame we experience when we sin – we are motivated by guilt.
- Other times we want to change out of fear of the consequences of our sin in this life or the next – we are motivated by fear.

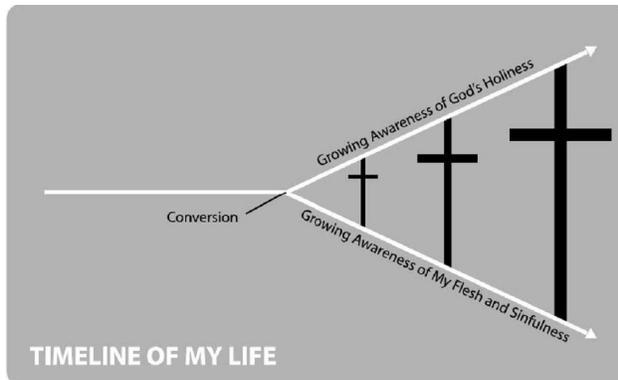
Romans 2:4 ESV

"Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?"

- 7) According to Romans 2:4, what is a Christian's motivation for repentance? What is yours? Describe times when you have wanted to prove yourself or were motivated by guilt or fear.

Change for a Christian is not motivated by fear, guilt, or proving oneself. It is motivated by love and gratitude in response to God's grace, God's 'kindness'.

The chart below illustrates how a growing understanding of the gospel leads to a transformed life. As we mature in the Christian life we become more aware of God's holiness and our sinfulness. But this growing awareness of the gap between God's holiness and our sinfulness does not lead to fear or despair. Instead, it shows us just how gracious he is. The growing cross in the chart represents a growing understanding of the immensity of God's grace--of the gospel.



As our understanding of God's grace grows, so does something else: our gratitude to God. We are filled with gratitude and love for God as we realize just how much he has done for us. The result is that we want to live for God. We want to honor him with our lives. In this way, the gospel gives us new desires and motivations to change that have their root in love and gratitude, not guilt and shame.

### THE GOSPEL AND TRANSFORMATION

Often we mistakingly believe that the way to change is simply to try harder. There is no doubt that effort is required in order to change, but true, lasting change does not begin by working harder. It begins by believing better. We are saved and we are changed by the same essential process: faith in the gospel. We are saved when we turn to the truth of the gospel and believe it. We are changed as we continually turn to the truth of the gospel and believe it.

We never "get beyond the gospel" in our Christian life to something more "advanced." The gospel is not the first "step" in a "stairway" of truths, rather, it is more like the "hub" in a "wheel" of truth. The gospel is not just the A-B-C's of Christianity, but it is the A to Z of Christianity. The gospel is not just the minimum required doctrine necessary to enter the kingdom, but the way we make all progress in the kingdom. We are not justified by the gospel and then sanctified by our obedience; rather, the gospel is the way we grow (Galatians 3:1-3) and are regularly renewed (Colossians 1:6). It is the solution to each problem, the key to each closed door, the power through every barrier (Romans 1:16-17)." -Tim Keller

The reason that many Christians remain stuck in patterns of sin is that they focus on behavior without addressing the underlying unbelief. They try really hard to change, but all of their efforts go into behaving better rather than believing better. They try to change their behavior to no avail because they never address the underlying unbelief that is driving their behavior.

Behind every sin is a lie about God. It has been that way since the Garden of Eden. As long as Adam and Eve trusted that God was good, they obeyed his warning not to eat from the tree that would kill them (Gen. 2:17). The way that the serpent got them to disobey God was by getting them to believe a lie about God rather than the truth. *"But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."* (Gen 3:4-5 ESV). The serpent convinced Eve that God is not really good. He is keeping her from what is good. As soon as Eve believes the lie about God, rather than the truth, her desires shift. Rather than wanting to avoid the tree, she desires it and she eats from it: *"So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her*

*husband who was with her, and he ate." (Gen 3:6 ESV). They didn't believe God, so they disobeyed, and the result was death. The key to transformation is to turn from the lies and remember and rejoice in the truth about God in the gospel.*

One of the important roles of the Holy Spirit is to reveal to us the truth about God. Jesus calls him the Spirit of truth (Jn 15:15) and promises that he will remind us of the truth (Jn 15:25). The Holy Spirit's job is to point us to the truth and our job is to turn to that truth and trust it. This is called repentance and faith. Repentance is turning from the lies about God and the sin that results from them. Faith is turning to the truth about God and the godly behavior that results from believing that truth. So we are saved by our initial repentance and faith in the gospel, and we are changed by our continual repentance and faith in the gospel.

## THE FOUR G'S

Let's consider four truths about God, all beginning with the letter 'G' that we can turn to when we are tempted: God is Gracious, Good, Great, and Glorious.

Most of us have never really understood that Christianity is not a self-help religion meant to enable moral people to become more moral. We don't need a self-help book; we need a Savior. We don't need to get our collective act together; we need death and resurrection and the life-transforming truths of the gospel. And we don't need them just once, at the beginning of our Christian life; we need them every moment of every day."

-Elyse Fitzpatrick

If I don't believe the truth that God is Gracious, then I will need to prove myself to God, others, and myself. The result will be many of the sinful behaviors we looked at last week: blaming, faking, criticizing, judging, demeaning. But if in the moment of temptation I turn to the truth that I am saved by grace, I won't feel the need to prove myself to others in sinful ways. Believing that God is gracious is essential for transformation, and we see his grace most clearly in the gospel--that God freely restores us to a right relationship with Himself through Jesus.

If I don't believe the truth that God is Good, then I will insatiably search for what is good in things that will never satisfy: food, sex, entertainment, relationships. But if I believe that God is good, I will find my satisfaction in him and enjoy his material gifts without obsessively pursuing them. Believing that God is good is essential for transformation, and we see his goodness most clearly in the gospel--that he sought our good even at the cost of Jesus' own life.

If I don't believe that God is Great, I will be filled with anxiety when life seems out of control. When I am anxious or worried it is difficult to love others well because I am consumed with my own struggles. I may even try to take control of people and situations through manipulation or intimidation. But when I believe that God is great, I can be at peace in all situations and care for others well because I know my Father in heaven is caring for me. Believing that God is great is essential for transformation, and we see his greatness most clearly in the gospel--that he triumphed over the enemies of sin, death, and Satan through Jesus' resurrection.

When I don't believe that God is Glorious and the One whose opinions are weightier than anyone else, I will end up listening to others and following their advice. I will also compare myself against others. I will give into peer pressure and live a life that looks just like everyone else in the culture. But if I believe that God is glorious, I will listen to him and walk in his ways. Believing God is glorious is essential for transformation, and we see his glory most clearly in the gospel- that Jesus is Lord over all and worthy of our love and devotion.

As you can see, the gospel is for both salvation and transformation. Therefore, it is essential that someone who wants to experience increasing freedom from the power of sin is immersed continually in the good news of the gospel through time in God's Word and a through vital connection with a community that will lovingly remind them of the truth each time they struggle with unbelief.

### GOOD NEWS FROM GOD'S WORD

The gospel is good news for our everyday struggles with sin. Believing the gospel is how we experience increasing freedom from sin like anger, lust, greed, jealousy, and selfishness. Consider how believing the four truths below would make a difference in your everyday life.

GOD IS GRACIOUS ⇔ SO We Don't Need To Prove Ourselves

8) When you are believing the lie that you need to prove yourself to God, others, and yourself, what are some of the sinful behaviors that result?

GOD IS GOOD ⇔ SO We Don't Need To Look Elsewhere For Satisfaction

9) When you are believing the lie that ultimate satisfaction is found in things other than God, what do you tend to turn to? What are the negative consequences?

GOD IS GREAT ⇔ SO We Don't Have To Be In Control

10) When you are believing the lie that God is not in control and he doesn't care for you, how do you respond when life feels out of control?

GOD IS GLORIOUS ⇔ So We Don't Have To Fear Others/Compare Ourselves to Others

11) When you are more aware of people and their opinions or approval than of God's approval, what happens when you don't feel accepted and approved of?

REFLECTION: Which of these four truths is the most important for you to be reminded on a regular basis? There is often one lie that is most attractive to our souls and is at the root of most of our sinful patterns and negative emotions. See if you can identify throughout the week what is at the root for you. Are you driven to prove yourself? Do you avoid difficulty and run to comfort? Do you feel the need to always be in control? Are you needy of people's approval?

## 4. GOSPEL POWER & PURPOSE

### THE POWER OF THE GOSPEL - PART 3 (FUTURE)

#### QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

What is one struggle, sin, or hardship in your life from which you would love to finally, fully be free?

#### HOPE FOR THE FUTURE

In session 2 we learned that the gospel is good news for the past - Jesus' life and death have brought us into a perfect, unbroken relationship with God. In session 3, we discussed how the gospel is good news for the present - Jesus sets us free from the power of sin and gives us new motivation to change. Additionally, by faith in Jesus, we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit who gives us a new power to change.

But the gospel not only gives us hope in our present struggles, but it also gives us hope for the future.

In this lesson, we examine the good news that: Through faith, we will be saved from the presence of sin because of Jesus' return. A day is coming when the struggle with sin will be over and everything that is wrong in this world will be made right.

*"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." -1 Corinthians 15:51-52 ESV*

- 1) According to the two statements below, what is in the process of being accomplished, and what has yet to be accomplished?
  - Through faith, we are being saved from the power of sin because of Jesus' resurrection and ascension.
  - Through faith, we will be saved from the presence of sin because of Jesus return.

Our task in the present...is to live as resurrection people in between Easter and the final day, with our Christian life, corporate and individual, in both worship and mission, as a sign of the first and a foretaste of the second." -N.T. Wright

#### GOOD NEWS FROM GOD'S WORD

Through Faith, we will be saved from the presence of sin because of Jesus' return

#### JESUS' RETURN IS GOOD NEWS FOR US

Read through the passages below and consider why Jesus' return is good news for us.

*John 14:1-3 ESV "Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also."*

- 2) According to this passage, why will Jesus return?

1 John 3:2 ESV "Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is."

3) According to this passage, what is the benefit of Jesus' return with regard to our own struggle with sin?

#### JESUS' RETURN IS GOOD NEWS FOR THE WORLD

Not only will those who put their faith in Jesus be perfected when he returns, so will the whole created world. Read these two passages from John's account of what will happen after Jesus returns.

*Revelation 21:1-5 ESV "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He 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." Also he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."*

*Revelation 22:1-5 ESV "Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, bright as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb through the middle of the street of the city; also, on either side of the river, the tree of life with its twelve kinds of fruit, yielding its fruit each month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. No longer will there be anything accursed, but the throne of God and of the Lamb will be in it, and his servants will worship him. They will see his face, and his name will be on their foreheads. And night will be no more. They will need no light of lamp or sun, for the Lord God will be their light, and they will reign forever and ever."*

4) If you put your faith in Jesus, you will immediately be with Jesus when you die. But after Jesus returns, something else is going to happen. Will people go up to heaven, or will heaven come down?

5) According to these passages, how will human experience change when Jesus returns?

6) People often think of salvation in terms of individual souls rising up to heaven for a non-material existence. How does this passage indicate otherwise? How is this picture of 'eternal life' different from what you may have heard or assumed in the past?

The vision of Revelation, indeed, the whole story of the Bible, leads us to look forward in hope to a creation restored to wholeness. Every facet of it is to be brought back to what God has intended." -Michael Goheen

## RE-IMAGINING SALVATION

What is salvation? Why did Jesus live, die, rise, ascend and - eventually - why will he return?

It is often assumed that the whole point of salvation is for people to go to heaven after they die. It is assumed that God's goal in salvation is to have a bunch of disembodied souls floating around with him in heaven. But that can't be God's goal in salvation because it is not the final outcome of God's plan of salvation.

After Jesus returns, people don't go up to heaven for an immaterial existence. Quite the opposite. Heaven comes down and transforms the material. It isn't just humans who are healed and restored-the whole of creation is healed and restored.

Very often people have come to the New Testament with the presumption that 'going to heaven when you die' is the implicit point of it all... They acquire that viewpoint from somewhere, but not from the New Testament." -N.T. Wright

Ultimately, salvation is not about being teleported out of our everyday existence. It is about our everyday existence being transformed. It is about ordinary life being renewed by the healing power of God.

Ordinary life is not our problem. Ordinary life is quite wonderful when you think about it: A BBQ with friends on a hot summer evening; building sand castles with your kids at the beach; laughing until your eyes water and your tummy hurts; enjoying winter slowly turns to spring as trees push out white blossoms and the smell of wisteria fills the air. Ordinary life-in the absence of pain and suffering-can be quite wonderful.

God cares about our everyday lives and this world, so his plan is to redeem it. His plan is to heal what is diseased, fix what is broken, and right what is wrong. That is God's plan of salvation according to the Bible.

One day, Jesus will return and the life that we are familiar with will be fully transformed-not into something completely different, but into something completely perfect. God isn't going to take away the pleasure of diving into a pool on a hot summer day, He is going to take away the risk of sunburn and skin cancer. God isn't going to take away the joy of being in love, He is going to take away the pain of divorce. That is the picture the Bible gives us of eternal life-life after Jesus' return.

If God is going to come one day with His presence and power to transform everyday life, everyday life must be important to him, even now. In fact, part of God's plan is to give people a taste, here and now, of what that future life will be like so that they will want to be there. That is one of the most important roles that Christians are to play in this world. As they learn to live, here and now, under the influence of God's transforming power, they give others a picture of the transformed life that will be enjoyed when Jesus returns.

Think of eternity as a movie. The movie isn't out yet, but it is coming to a world near you. Think of this life as the trailer to the movie. Trailers are helpful in determining if you want to see a movie. They weave together snippets of the movie, and, if done well, give the viewer a sense of what the movie will be like. Christians are to live their lives now in such a way that gives people a picture of what life will be like when Jesus returns, so others will want to be there. Christians

are to imagine life as it will be after God heals and restores the world and then live life now as a preview of that coming attraction.

An eternity wearing white robes and playing harps is a movie most would rather skip. We won't be playing harps or sitting on clouds. An accurate picture of eternal life is learning to live an ordinary life with the transforming power of God. It means wiping away tears now because one day God will wipe them all away. It means finding ways to ease people's pain now because one day God will take away all pain. It means feeding the hungry and caring for the poor as a picture of the day when God puts an end to hunger, poverty, sin, and suffering. Living ordinary life with the intentionality of giving people a picture of the gospel, the good news of Jesus is the goal-everyday life with gospel intentionality.

If you just imagine this world but imagine it perfect, you begin to get a picture of the future salvation that belongs to those who trust in Jesus. You also get clarity on how to live, right now, in a world that is not yet perfect. What Christians believe about the nature of salvation in the future will impact how they live in the present.

- 7) What difference does it make in our everyday lives to know that we're in the middle of this Great Story and that one day Jesus will return to make everything right, and finally remove sin and sin's effects completely?
  
- 8) What would be the evidence in our lives if the truth of the gospel's future tense really came home to our hearts? How might we think and act differently?

Hope is one of the theological virtues. This means that a continual looking forward to the eternal world is not, as some modern people think, a form of escapism or wishful thinking, but one of the things a Christian is meant to do. It does not mean that we are to leave the present world as it is. If you read history you will find that the Christians who did most for the present world were just those who thought most of the next. The apostles who brought about, on foot, the conversion of the Roman Empire. The great men who built up the Middle Ages, the English Evangelicals who abolished the Slave Trade, all left their mark on earth, precisely because their minds were occupied with heaven. It is since Christians have largely ceased to think of the other world that they have become so ineffective in this. – C. S. Lewis

### GOOD NEWS FOR EVERYDAY LIFE

Christians are not only called to tell people about the good news of Jesus, but they are also called to be good news to other people. Each Christian is to live their life, by the power of God, in such a way that gives people a preview of what life will be like after Jesus returns and the whole world is renewed.

So what does that look like, practically?

Christians can ask themselves, "What would bring others the greatest good and God the greatest honor." For example, an engineer could consider how to be a Christian engineer by asking how he could do his job in a way that maximized human flourishing and magnified the creativity and beauty of God. A City Manager might ask herself how she would do her job in a way that brings the greatest services to most people so the whole community can flourish. These practical thought experiments can help Christians begin to live their lives as a preview of what life will be like after Jesus returns.

- 9) In one of your relational roles (spouse, parent, child, etc.): What are some practical ways that you could bring others the greatest good and God the greatest honor as a preview of life after Jesus returns? {think God as Father - How He loves...}
  
- 10) In one of your functional roles (work, volunteer, coach, etc.): What are some practical ways that you could bring others the greatest good and God the greatest honor as a preview of life after Jesus returns? {think God as Son - How He served...}
  
- 11) In your role as a missionary: Consider a need that exists among the people in your community. What are some practical ways that, together, you could bring others the greatest good and God the greatest honor as a preview of life after Jesus returns? {Think God as Spirit - How He sends}

**ACTION:** As a group, discuss one need that you could meet together as a preview of the salvation that Jesus will bring at his second coming. It could be meeting a practical or emotional need in someone's life, or addressing a concern you see in your community. Come up with a plan for how to meet that need together so that others can experience the good news of Jesus here and now.