

## What is the Gospel?

*1 Corinthians 15:1-11* Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, <sup>2</sup> by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain. <sup>3</sup> ¶ For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, <sup>5</sup> and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. <sup>6</sup> After that He was seen by over five hundred brethren at once, of whom the greater part remain to the present, but some have fallen asleep. <sup>7</sup> After that He was seen by James, then by all the apostles. <sup>8</sup> Then last of all He was seen by me also, as by one born out of due time. <sup>9</sup> For I am the least of the apostles, who am not worthy to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the church of God. <sup>10</sup> But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me. <sup>11</sup> Therefore, whether it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed.

In Greg Gilbert's book, *What is the Gospel*, he lists several statements of professing Christians as to what the gospel is. Most of them are frighteningly vague and unclear.

We've been spending time in 2 John learning that true love is limited by truth, specifically the truth of the gospel. We've been seeing that the gospel is the boundary of the Christian faith. That's why it's absolutely essential that we are very clear on the gospel. If there is one thing Christians should know backwards, forwards, inside-out, it's the gospel. We should be able to say it in one sentence, in two, in four or in twenty if we needed to. Christians should be absolutely at home and familiar with the gospel.

But that's just the problem, as you've heard from excerpts from Greg Gilbert's book. People are vague and fuzzy on what ought to be as clear to Christians as the sunlight after a thunderstorm.

We've already seen how our culture has warped the correct view of love. Love is expressing myself; love is feeling sweetly about something or even the idea of something. And when it comes to the gospel, that same kind of vague fuzziness comes in. All manner of people claim to believe in the gospel. Just about everyone you meet tells you he or she believes in God and Jesus. But if you were to ask them for the content of their belief – what they believe, in whom do they believe, what are they believing for – they would get uncomfortable. They'll start to shuffle and hum and haw, and say they believe and their faith is a very personal thing. And if you keep pressing them for the content of what they believe, you might even get an angry response which says, “I don't have to believe just like you to be a Christian. God knows my heart. I pray every day. I read the bible. God knows that I believe.” And that's just another example of love on my own terms. I'll decide if I love God, and I'll decide if I believe in God. My belief does not have to be based in truth; my belief just has to be based on a feeling of sincerity.

The Bible predicts a frightening scene where many people, who chose to believe in their own sincerity, will find out that they never believed the gospel.

*Matthew 7:22-23* Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' <sup>23</sup> "And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'

Love is based in truth. The boundary of Christian love is the gospel. The gospel is made up of truths, truths you must believe and receive to be on the inside of Christianity.

What is the gospel?

Here in 1 Corinthians 15, we find one of the clearest explanations of the gospel. In this chapter, Paul was responding to some people in Corinth who were denying the resurrection of the body, and therefore, the resurrection of Christ. In so doing, they were denying the gospel. So before he lays out answers to their resurrection-objection, he gives the gospel very plainly and simply.

*Let's read it again:*

*1 Corinthians 15:1-4 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, <sup>2</sup> by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain. <sup>3</sup> ¶ For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, <sup>4</sup> and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures,*

The gospel centres around two events – the death and resurrection of Jesus. The burial simply proved Jesus was truly dead, and the appearances listed in verses 5- 8 prove that He truly lived again. The gospel is about these events. But the gospel is not just these events. A Christian is not someone who believes certain things happened over one weekend in A.D. 33. A Christian is one who understands the meaning of these events, and embraces them with his whole heart.

To understand what the gospel is, we want to look closely at these verses, and ask them four questions. Who is Christ, Why did He die, how did He die, and what must we do?

## **I. Who is Christ?**

We begin with the words of verse 3:

*1 Corinthians 15:3 For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,*

The gospel is about Christ dying and rising for our sins. So the first and biggest question is, who is Christ? Who is Jesus? There are a lot of contenders for the title of Jesus. There is the Mormon Jesus. There is the Hindu Jesus. There is the Hindu Jesus. There is Oprah's Jesus. Who exactly is He?

Paul doesn't discuss that here, he simply assumes we know. If we want to know who Christ is, one of the clearest passages is the first chapter of John.

*John 1:1-3 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.*

### **Jesus is God, the Self-Existent Creator**

John tells us that the Word was God, and the Word created everything. Jesus Christ, before He was given that title amongst men, existed from eternity past. He spoke the world into being. He created the tree that would provide the wood for his own crucifixion. He designed the DNA molecule of every human to ever live, including Mary. He spoke Rigel and Betelgeuse into existence, and formed the core of Saturn and Mars. He thought of water and created it. All things were made by Him and without Him nothing was made that was made.

This passage tells us something else about Him.

and the Word **was with God**, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God.

John 1:18 No one has seen God at any time. The only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has declared Him.

### **Jesus is God the Son**

John tells us that Jesus was all at once God, but also with God. We find out that He is the only begotten Son, as theologians put it – the eternally begotten Son

Jesus is God, but Jesus is not the Father. Jesus is not the Spirit. Jesus is the Son.

The Christ of the gospel is not a creature, nor is He one mode of God. He is the Eternal Son.

John tells us more about who Christ is.

John 1:14 *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth.*

### **Jesus is Man (born of a virgin), who truly lived and died.**

Jesus took flesh. Not like angels who appeared to Old Testament saints. He was born. He took to himself a true human nature.

*Luke 1:34-35 Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" <sup>35</sup> And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God.*

Jesus ate, drank, slept, sweated, and grew tired, thirsty. Jesus needed food, drink and sleep. He was truly man, full God and fully man. Two natures, one person.

It is absolutely crucial that we believe on the Jesus Christ of the Bible, because Paul warned in 2 Corinthians 11 that false teachers present us with another Jesus. All around us are Jesuses that bear no relationship to the Bible. Jesus the creature. Jesus the New Age avatar; Jesus that political revolutionary; Jesus the prophet of Islam; Jesus the Enlightened spiritual visionary; Jesus the eco-warrior.

Jesus can certainly not be all of these things. To call on Jesus if you do not believe you are calling on the Eternal Son of God, the God-Man, is to call on someone who will not answer, like dialling the wrong number. The only qualified Saviour is the God-man Jesus Christ.

*1 Timothy 2:5 <sup>5</sup> For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus,*

Years ago, Ed Frampton was in the room when a person supposedly doing evangelism said to a Jewish lady, "Do you believe in the Lord?" to which the Jewish lady responded, "Yes."

The evangelists responded by saying, "God bless you, you're saved."

When she left the room, the lady turned to Ed and said, "She thinks I mean Jesus, but I don't. I mean God as we Jews think of him."

You see, the gospel hinges on a true identity of Jesus Christ. When Jesus was on the cross, he was in between two thieves. One called him Lord and asked for mercy. The other mocked him and remained in rejection - believer on one side, unbeliever on the other. In the same way, the identity of

Jesus divides the whole world into those who believe God came to us as a man and rose again and ascended, and those who do not.

## **II. Why did he die? “for our sins”**

The next part of 1 Corinthians 15:3 tells us more about the gospel.  
“Christ died for our sins” This gives us partly the reason for the gospel.

Man has a problem. His primary problem is not his lack of education, his lack of clean running water, his lack of literacy, his health, his poverty. His primary problem is that he has broken ties with his God.

*Isaiah 53:6 All we like sheep have gone astray; We have turned, every one, to his own way;*

The word for going our own way from God is 'sin'. How many of us do that?

*Romans 3:10 As it is written: "There is none righteous, no, not one;*

*Romans 3:23 <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

From the beginning, God made man to fellowship with Himself. But believing Satan's lies, we chose to disobey, to rebel and to strike out for independence. So instead of getting more life, we got death. We got death because we separated from the source of life, and we got death as a judgement from God upon sin.

*Ephesians 2:1-3 And you He made alive, who were dead in trespasses and sins, ... and were by nature children of wrath, just as the others.*

*Revelation 20:15 And anyone not found written in the Book of Life was cast into the lake of fire.*

What should a fair and just Creator do with a creature who has everything from His hand, but disobeys so that he can become equal with God? God is holy, and good, and fair. Sin is high-handed treason against God; it is openly rebelling against the source of our life.

So the good news is about God the Son coming back to rescue these dead and fallen children of Adam from their rebellion.

We need to know what the gospel is really about. It is not about social renovation. The gospel is not primarily food to the hungry, money to the poor, employment to the unemployed, social advance for the oppressed. It might result in such benefits, but such things do not constitute the intention or purpose of the Gospel.

It is not about social revolution. The gospel is not a paradigm for the revolt against forms of political tyranny or oppression as Liberation Theology in our own country suggested. It is not about a psychological innovation. The gospel does not provide some kind of internal therapy to affirm ‘the self’ or to liberate you from ‘misplaced shame’. It is not about moral influence. The gospel is not simply a revelation of God’s love teaching people to sacrificially love one another. It is not about a potential supply of grace, which by human merit and cooperation (and about a thousand years in purgatory), we access and experience. It is not about realising your own godhood, coming to worship the divine within. It is not a ransom paid to Satan to release his claim on man. It is not some kind of mixed political, social and even ecological effect which brings in ‘the Kingdom’.

The gospel is about individual salvation from the penalty, power and eventual presence of sin, so as to enjoy restored fellowship with the Triune God. It is firstly about sin and its consequences and its

judgement from a holy God before anything else.

"It is a great mistake to give a man who has not been convicted of sin certain passages that were never meant for him. The Law is what he needs...Do not offer the consolation of the Gospel until he sees and knows he is guilty before God. We must give enough of the Law to take away all self-righteousness. I pity the man who preaches only one side of truth - always the gospel and never the Law" D.L. Moody

John Wesley was once mentoring a young preacher and told him "Preach 90 percent Law and 10 percent grace."

We haven't understood the gospel until we have seen ourselves as lawbreakers. We haven't understood the gospel until we have understood what ought to have happened to us apart from the gospel.

### **III. How did He die? "for our sins" - *in place of***

Why Jesus died is not exactly the same thing as how He died. We know He died because we had sinned. But how did He die in such a way that it saves people from their sins? What kind of death can deal with sin?

"Christ died for our sins" Christ's death was a death in place of our sins. He died that very death which lawbreakers deserved.

*2 Corinthians 5:21* <sup>21</sup> *For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*

Jesus was sinless. Jesus bore our sins, so that we might experience the righteousness of God in Him.

This principle of substitution was taught by God from after Adam and Eve fell. In order for the guilty to live, an innocent must die in their place. All those animal sacrifices looked forward to a human being who would be truly morally innocent, and be guilty of no sin, so that he could bear the sins of others.

On the cross, Jesus became a lightning rod for all the anger of God towards sin, all His just punishment on sin. Jesus became the epitome of sin, the ultimate and final sin bearer.

*Isaiah 53:5* <sup>5</sup> *But He was wounded for our transgressions, He was bruised for our iniquities;*

The gospel is that the God-Man died as a substitute for sin, being punished by God as if He were a sinner.

But it does not only say He died for our sins, it says He rose again. Why is that important? It means He did not stay dead, under the penalty of sin. He bore our sins, but He rose again, vindicated. The reason He can give us new life is because He rose from the dead – alive!

He ascended to heaven, where He is now the living Saviour, the High Priest. He will return as King and Judge.

Until we understand that the gospel is God treating Jesus as if he were me, and God treating me as if I were Jesus, we haven't understood that the gospel is a gift - an unearned, undeserved gift. Every

other religion will insist that you give God something valuable in exchange. You improve yourself, or prove yourself, and God will then accept you. The gospel says God will never accept you for your works. He will accept you if you hide yourself in another.

That wonderful hymn says it well:  
Rock of Ages, cleft for me,  
let me hide myself in thee;

Nothing in my hand I bring,  
simply to the cross I cling;  
naked, come to thee for dress;  
helpless, look to thee for grace;  
foul, I to the fountain fly;  
wash me, Savior, or I die.

Many years ago I was teaching this to children. And I had two children stand in front as my volunteers. I put white aprons on both of them. I showed that because of the white aprons, they could stand closely together. Then I took one of them, and smeared mud all over his white apron. And I asked, can they now stand together? No. So what happens? They swap. The boy with the white apron took it off and gave it to the boy with the dirty apron. The boy with the dirty apron took off his dirty apron and gave it to the other boy. And I explained that Jesus took our dirty aprons, and God punished him, until it was over and Jesus rose again, righteous, with that white apron again.

The gospel is about trusting in a transfer – my sins for his righteousness. My punishment on him; His life in me.

#### **IV. What must man do?**

*1 Corinthians 15:1-2 Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, <sup>2</sup> by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you -- unless you believed in vain.*

Paul says that the Corinthians heard this gospel, they received the gospel, and they continued to believe the gospel. What must man do with this news that the Son of God has died and risen as a substitute for sin?

*Mark 1:14-15 Now after John was put in prison, Jesus came to Galilee, preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent, and believe in the gospel."*

Repent and believe. Those cannot be separated. They are two sides of the same coin. If you truly repent, then you truly believe. If you truly believe, then you truly repent.

What is repentance? Repentance is turning away from something. What does God want you to turn away from? He wants you to turn away from sin – from a life lived for yourself, to yourself, by yourself. He wants you to acknowledge that you have not lived at all like a thankful, dependent, submissive creature should before the Creator. You turn your back on self-rule. You turn your back on being the master of your own life. You turn your back on all the evil that comes from pleasing and loving yourself above all.

Repentance is not that you achieve sinless perfection by yourself. Repentance is taking sides. You

take God's side over your own.

The other side of the coin is faith. Faith is embracing and believing wholeheartedly in the Person and Work of Jesus. He is the Son of God, the God Man, who lived, died and rose again for my sins. I come to Him, asking Him to forgive me, cleanse me, give me His righteousness, and reconcile me to God.

Sometimes people make faith into something other than it really is.

A.W Tozer: "The trouble is that the whole "Accept Christ" attitude is likely to be wrong. It shows Christ applying to us rather than us to Him. It makes Him stand hat-in-hand awaiting our verdict on Him, instead of our kneeling with troubled hearts awaiting His verdict on us...

To accept Christ is to form an attachment to the Person of our Lord Jesus altogether unique in human experience. The attachment is intellectual, volitional and emotional. The believer is intellectually convinced that Jesus is both Lord and Christ; he has set his will to follow Him at any cost and soon his heart is enjoying the exquisite sweetness of His fellowship... This attachment is all-inclusive in that it joyfully accepts Christ for all that He is. ....The true believer owns Christ as his All in All without reservation. ...Further, his attachment to Christ is all-exclusive. The Lord becomes to him not one of several rival interests, but the one exclusive attraction forever. He orbits around Christ as the earth around the sun, held in thrall by the magnetism of His love, drawing all his life and light and warmth from Him."

A famous South African evangelist is in the habit of saying to people, "Do you believe Jesus died for your sins?" and if they say yes, then he tells them, "You're saved." Firstly, no man has the right to declare another man saved. Second, the question is not, do you believe in this historical fact. The question is, have you repented of living for yourself and embraced Jesus and His work on your behalf?

How careful we need to be of vaccinating people against the true gospel. Vaccinations are a culture of weak germs that are not strong enough to overcome your body's defences. Once injected, your immune system learns of those germs, adapts, and fights off the real thing when it comes. Too many people today have been injected with a very weak form of the gospel. And their minds and souls have adapted so that they think they have accepted the real thing. And when the real disease comes along – the real gospel – they are immune, because they are so sure they have accepted the real thing.

This is the Gospel. Who Christ is – the sinless God-Man. Why Christ died – for rebels who faced a punishment they deserved. How Christ died – as a sinless substitute, who rose again and lives as a Saviour and Judge. What man must do? Repent of living for himself and rebelling against God's authority, and embrace God's mercy in the Person and work of Jesus Christ.

Have you embraced this gospel? Is that what you are trusting in? If not, then stop trusting in your own trust. Stop trusting in own sincerity. Stop trusting in your feelings of connection with God. Embrace the biblical Gospel and be saved.