

The Gospel of Jesus Christ

The word *gospel* comes from the Old English word *godspel* meaning “God story”. It is a translation of the Greek word *euaggelion* and the Latin word *evangelium*, both of which mean “good news”. Whichever way you look at it, the gospel of Jesus Christ is both the God story and the good news. The apostle Paul wrote, “I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes ... For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: ‘The righteous will live by faith.’” (Romans 1:16-17).

Jesus himself summed up the gospel eloquently when he said, “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). From this one statement we understand that:

- God loves us and gave us his only Son so that we might receive eternal life.
- Jesus Christ is the means by which we can be saved.
- Eternal life (salvation) is achieved by believing in Jesus, and not by human effort.

It is clear from this that the gospel message is of the utmost importance. If it is true, then our eternal destiny depends on our knowing and understanding this message. Speaking through his prophet, God sounded a solemn warning to all who reject his wisdom: “For the waywardness of the simple will kill them, and the complacency of fools will destroy them; but whoever listens to me will live in safety and be at ease, without fear of harm” (Proverbs 1:32-33).

This paper examines the key elements of the gospel message – God’s message of hope to a lost world. Please keep reading, for in the gospel of Jesus Christ is the gift of life.

A World in Need of a Saviour

Most people would agree that the world we live in is full of evil. Many of us harbour the desire for a saviour to deliver the world, and us personally, from this evil. As we have seen already, God has given us just such a Saviour in the person of Jesus Christ. Indeed, “Salvation is found in no-one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

Few people, however, would consider that they personally contribute significantly to the evil in the world. This position is not consistent with the teachings of the Bible where we learn that, “There is no-one righteous, not even one ... for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:10, 23).

To understand how we got this way, we need to go back to the beginning. The first chapter of the first book of the Bible, *Genesis*, describes how God created the universe in six days. At the end of the sixth day, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). If a perfect, holy and righteous God considered the creation to be very good, then it must have been completely free of all evil (including death, suffering and hardship). At this time God had already created the first two people, Adam and Eve, so they must have also been very good (Genesis 1:26-30). Indeed, we are told that, “God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them (Genesis 1:27).

In the second chapter of *Genesis*, we learn that Adam and Eve lived in a very beautiful place called Eden. The trees in Eden were “pleasing to the eye and good for food” (Genesis 2:9), and the animals were under their authority (Genesis 2:19). God blessed Adam and Eve and commanded them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground” (Genesis 1:28).

But in chapter three of Genesis, we learn that Adam and Eve rebelled against God. Eve believed the lies of Satan, pictured here as a snake, and chose to disobey a clear command of God to “not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil” (Genesis 2:16-17). The symbolic language used here vividly illustrates many aspects of sin:

- Satan tempts people to sin. He first casts doubt into their minds about what God requires (v. 1), and follows this up with bold-faced lies about the consequences of sin (v. 4).
- People are naturally attracted to sin. To Eve, the tree looked good, and the thought of gaining knowledge like that of God was attractive (v. 6a).
- People follow others into sin. We are not told what Adam was thinking when he chose to disobey God, but it is likely that he believed the same lies as Eve had been told, and adding to that, he surely did not want to miss out on what she now had (v. 6b).
- Sin leads to separation between God and man. The friendship that Adam and Eve had enjoyed with God was now replaced with fear (v. 8).
- Sin leads to broken relationships between people. When confronted by God, Adam blamed both God and Eve for his own failings (v. 12), while Eve blamed Satan (v. 13).
- The consequences of sin do not always follow immediately, but they are certain to follow. In the case of this original sin, all of mankind and the whole of creation was cursed. Death, hardship and suffering had become a part of everyday life, and Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden (vv. 16-24). As for Satan, he was cast down to the earth where he and his offspring would wage a continual war against mankind until his time is ended by Christ (vv. 14-15).

This explains the origin of evil in the world, and of sin in the hearts of men, but does it mean that everyone is sinful? In the next section, you will have the opportunity to test your own righteousness.

The Ten Commandments

Ever since the fall of man in the garden of Eden, God has been working to restore the broken relationship with man, his most treasured creature. The first major step in this process was to select a people to whom he would reveal himself and be their God.

About 2000 years before Christ, God chose the Hebrew nation to be his people. At that time, the Hebrews were slaves in Egypt and were being treated cruelly by the king of Egypt. The Hebrews, who were the forebears of the Jews, already knew God through Abraham, the father of their nation. So they cried out to God for deliverance, and he raised up Moses, a fellow Hebrew, to rescue them. With God’s help, Moses brought the Hebrew nation, also called Israel, out of Egypt and led them to the Promised Land in modern-day Israel. You can read about this in *Exodus*, the second book of the Bible.

In order to instruct the Israelites on how they should live, God gave Moses ten commandments. These are set out in Exodus 20:1-17 and may be paraphrased as follows:

1. Do not worship false gods (v. 3).
2. Do not make or worship idols (vv. 4-5).
3. Do not misuse the name of the Lord (v. 7).
4. Remember the Sabbath day and keep it holy (vv. 8-11).
5. Honour your father and mother (v. 12).
6. Do not murder (v. 13).

7. Do not commit adultery (v. 14).
8. Do not steal (v. 15).
9. Do not bear false witness (v. 16).
10. Do not covert (v. 17).

So, how well did you do? Have you ever consulted a fortune teller or a horoscope to predict your future? If so, then you have broken the first commandment. Have you ever worn a good luck charm, and believed that it might actually bring you good luck? If so, then you have broken the second commandment. Have you ever used the name of the Lord as a curse, or exclaimed, “Oh my God!” or “For God’s sake!” or even “God help us!” when you weren’t actually praying? If so, then you have broken the third commandment.

You might be able to say that you have never committed adultery, but Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Do not commit adultery.’ But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart” (Matthew 5:27). Again, you might think that you have never murdered anyone, but Jesus said, “You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, ‘Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.’ But I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment” (Matthew 5:21-22).

The Ten Commandments are the foundation of the so-called law of Moses (which is actually the law of God given through Moses). But there are many other commandments and rituals that make up the full body of the law. If you want to, you can read about them in the books of *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy* which complete the first five chapters of the Bible (called the Pentateuch).

It should be clear by now that it is impossible for any ordinary person to fully obey the law of God and thereby achieve righteousness in his eyes. This is confirmed by the apostle Paul who wrote: “Therefore no-one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin” (Romans 3:20).

The Judgment of God Against Sin

The word *sin* is used here to describe behaviour which is contrary to the will of God. Since God is holy and righteous, sin must be unholy and unrighteous. As we have seen, sin was found in the heart of Adam when he disobeyed God, and as a result “sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all have sinned” (Romans 5:12).

While death is the ultimate penalty for sin, there are many other consequences which can affect us while we are still alive. Jesus said, “I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you are free indeed” (John 8:34-36). Unrighteousness also leads to a loss of peace: “But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. ‘There is no peace,’ says my God, ‘for the wicked.’” (Isaiah 57:20-21).

The book of *Proverbs* contains many sayings that teach us about the benefits of right behaviour (righteousness) and the consequences of bad behaviour (wickedness). For example, we learn that, “The path of the righteous is like the first gleam of dawn, shining ever brighter till the full light of day. But the way of the wicked is like deep darkness; they do not know what makes them stumble” (Proverbs 4:18-19). By comparison, David proclaimed, “If the Lord delights in a man’s way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his right hand” (Psalm 37:24). Even if the wicked do prosper in this life, we are told that, “Those who are far from [God] will perish” (Psalm 73:27). Indeed, it is “Better the little that the righteous have than the wealth of many wicked; for the power of the wicked will be broken, but the Lord upholds the righteous” (Psalm 37:16-17).

Even after death, the unrighteous are not out of trouble. For Jesus taught that sinners will be “thrown into hell, where ‘their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched.’” (Mark 9:47-48). In another place, Jesus taught that the unrighteous “will go away to eternal punishment, but the righteous to eternal life” (Matthew 25:46). Similarly, Paul said, “There will be trouble and distress for every human being who does evil ... but glory, honour and peace for everyone who does good” (Romans 2:9-10).

In short, dying in a state of separation from God is *very* bad, while dying with our hearts in a right relationship with him is *very* good. But how can people whose hearts are full of sin be made righteous before a perfect, holy God? Enter, Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

The Saviour

The master stroke in God’s great plan to restore the broken relationship between himself and man was to send Jesus into the world to be its Saviour. The title *Christ* (in Greek, *Christos*) means “anointed”, and also “redeemer” or “saviour” (the equivalent of “Messiah” in Hebrew). Jesus said, “I did not come to judge the world, but to save it” (John 12:47). At his birth, an angel of God proclaimed, “Today in the town of David a Saviour has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord” (Luke 2:11).

Jesus was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin, Mary, as predicted by the prophet Isaiah: “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him ‘Immanuel’ – which means, ‘God is with us.’” (Matthew 1:23). But what distinguishes Christ the most from any other religious leader, either before or since, is the astonishing claims that he made about himself. For example, he claimed:

- To be the Son of God (Matthew 16:15-17; Mark 14:61-62; Luke 22:70; John 10:31-36)
- To exist before he was born (John 8:58; 17:5)
- To come from heaven (John 3:13; 6:33-35; 8:23)
- To have been sent into the world by his Father (Luke 10:16; John 4:34)
- To be one with the Father (John 10:30, 37-38)
- To have the authority of God (Matthew 9:1-8; 28:18; John 3:16; 5:26-30; 11:25-26)
- To be without sin (John 8:29, 46; 14:30-31)
- To be the Truth (John 7:16; 8:40; 12:49-50; 14:6)
- To be the fulfilment of prophecy (Matthew 5:17; Luke 4:17-21; 24:25-27, 44)
- To be the Messiah (Matthew 16:15-17; 26:63-64; John 4:25-26)
- To give eternal life (John 3:14-16; 6:27, 40, 51; 10:9, 28; 11:25-26; 14:16; 17:1-3)

There is strong evidence to support the claims that Christ made about himself. This evidence is discussed in detail in the paper *Was Jesus Christ God?* in the series *Ultimate Questions*. In summary, his claims are supported by his character and teachings, the miracles he performed, Bible prophecy, and ultimately his resurrection from the dead, a feat that no other religious leader has been able to emulate. There is also very strong evidence to support the resurrection, which is presented in the paper *Did Jesus Christ Rise from the Dead?* in the series *Ultimate Questions*.

Jesus was both fully human, and fully God. He called himself the *Son of Man* because he was born of a woman and therefore fully human, but also the *Son of God* since his Father was God. The author of Hebrews, writing some time after the death and resurrection of Christ, wrote: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest

who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are – yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Saved by Grace Through Faith

We have seen already that ordinary people cannot live sin-free lives, and can do nothing in their own strength to save themselves from God’s judgment against sin. Paul warned the unrighteous, “because of your stubbornness and your unrepentant heart, you are storing up wrath against yourself for the day of God’s wrath, when his righteous judgment will be revealed. God ‘will give to each person according to what he has done.’” (Romans 2:5-6). But the good news is that through faith in Christ we can be saved from the judgment of God: “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God’s wrath remains on him” (John 3:36).

You may have noticed that in all of the statements made so far about attaining salvation, the only thing required of people is that they believe in Jesus. This is seen everywhere in the gospel of Christ. No mention is ever made of religious rituals or good deeds making us worthy of salvation. Indeed, we are warned that such works will *not* save us: “For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no-one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). Thus, while it is good to do good deeds, these things in and of themselves will not save us from the judgment of God. In fact, doing good works in order to earn salvation can cause us to sin even more by making us proud.

Thus, it is by grace (i.e., the undeserved mercy of God) that we are saved provided that we have faith in Jesus: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have this peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God” (Romans 5:1-2).

The Sacrifice of Christ

You might also have noticed that salvation is somehow related to the death of Christ. Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11). In this willing sacrifice of his life, Christ demonstrated both the righteousness and the love of God. On the one hand, a righteous God could not allow sin to go unpunished, because that would be unjust; but on the other hand, by sending his own Son to pay the price for our sins, his love for us was revealed.

It is by this sacrifice that all who believe in Christ are made right with God and our salvation is obtained: “God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. Since we have now been justified by his blood, how much more shall we be saved from God’s wrath through him! For if, when we were God’s enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled shall we be saved through his life! Not only is this so, but we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation” (Romans 5:8-11).

Amazingly, this remarkable and unique event in the history of the world was predicted by the prophet Isaiah over 700 years before Christ was born: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed” (Isaiah 53:4-5). Therefore, the prophet assures us, “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool” (Isaiah 1:18).

Obtaining Salvation

There are four critical aspects to obtaining salvation: Confession, repentance, forgiveness and belief. Repentance and forgiveness are at the heart of the gospel message: “This is what is written: The Christ will suffer and rise from the dead on the third day, and repentance and forgiveness of sins will be preached in his name to all nations, beginning in Jerusalem” (Luke 24:46-47). Repentance involves heartfelt regret and sorrow for past sins, and a determination to change one’s ways. But in order to repent of our sins, it is necessary to confess them to God: “If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:8-9). Confession can also bring healing: “Therefore confess your sins to each other and pray for each other so that you may be healed” (James 5:16).

The forgiveness of sins is something that we both receive from God and give to those who have sinned against us. Receiving forgiveness is humbling, while granting forgiveness is heroic. It can often be hard to forgive people who have hurt us badly, and yet forgiving them is the most effective means of being healed from the very pain which they have caused us. It can also sometimes be hard to forgive ourselves. But if Christ has forgiven us, who are we to object? Having received his forgiveness, we are no longer condemned: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

Underpinning these actions is the belief that Jesus is our Saviour. Thus, Paul taught, “if you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. For it is with your heart that you believe and are justified, and it is with your mouth that you confess and are saved” (Romans 10:9-10).

Enter by the Narrow Gate

From what has been presented so far, it may seem like obtaining salvation is a walk in the park. And up to this point, it is, but after this it gets a great deal harder. The Christian walk is not easy and is not for the faint hearted. Jesus urged his listeners to, “Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction, and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it” (Matthew 7:13-14). This imagery contrasts the comparatively easy life of the sinners with the hard road that the righteous must follow.

Christians are subject to the same trials of life common to all people, but in Christ these trials serve to make them stronger. Thus, Paul described the troubles of this life as “light and momentary” which are “achieving for us an eternal weight of glory that far outweighs them all” (2 Corinthians 4:17). In addition to the ordinary struggles of life, Jesus warned his disciples to expect hostility from those who belong to the world: “If the world hates you, keep in mind that it hated me first. If you belonged to the world, it would love you as its own. As it is, you do not belong to the world, but I have chosen you out of the world. That is why the world hates you” (John 15:18-19). The apostle Paul attributed this opposition to Satanic forces: “For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms” (Ephesians 6:12).

If this sounds daunting, take courage, because Jesus has promised to help us. To everyone who loves him, Jesus will send the Holy Spirit to guide them and to strengthen them: “If you love me, you will obey what I command. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Counsellor to be with you for ever – the Spirit of truth. The world cannot accept him, because it neither sees him nor knows him. But you know him, for he lives with you and will be in you.” (John 14:15-17). Therefore, even in the midst of troubles, we can know the peace of Christ: “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid” (John 14:27).

Conclusions

Throughout history men have created many imaginative stories and devised many difficult religious practices in an attempt to address the problem of evil in the world and to defeat death which is the wages of sin. But God has provided only one way: "And this is the testimony: God has given us eternal life, and this life is in his Son. He who has the Son has life; he who does not have the Son does not have life" (1 John 5:11-12). Thus, salvation is within easy reach. It does not require a great pilgrimage, or a life of isolation and austerity. All that is required is that we believe in Jesus Christ: "Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life, but whoever rejects the Son will not see life, for God's wrath remains on him" (John 3:36).

Salvation is just a prayer away: "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (Romans 10:13). Having received Christ into our lives, we then show our love for him by obeying his commands. To learn what these are, you will need to read the Bible and fellowship with other Christians. However, it is important that you don't rely on what other people tell you the Bible says; you need to learn these things for yourself. If you rely on others, they could lead you astray into false teachings. As you read the Bible, pray that the Holy Spirit will help you to understand what you are reading: "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5).

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If you would like to get to know Jesus Christ, this is what you should do:

- ☑ **Pray to Jesus.** "The Lord is near to all who call on him ... he hears their cry and saves them" (Psalm 145:18-19).
- ☑ **Read the Bible.** You should start by reading the whole of the New Testament, asking Jesus to help you to understand what you are reading.
- ☑ **Join a church.** It is vital that you find a church which holds the Bible to be the final authority in all matters of faith and practice for those who believe in Jesus Christ.

Acknowledgments

Bible quotations are from the New International Version, 1984 unless otherwise indicated.