



THIS MATTERS

What Is the Gospel?

Adapted from an article by Justin Holcombe

Christian theology is about the gospel, which is focused on who Jesus is and what he said and did. Jesus is the hero of history and the centerpiece of the entire Bible.

God made us to worship him. He was our Father, living and walking among us, giving us everything we needed to live, and yet we chose to sin against him—a [cosmic act of treason](#) punishable by death ([Gen 2:17](#); [Rm 6:23](#)). As a result, we were separated from God, and we try to be our own gods, declaring what is right and wrong, and living life by our own standards.

JESUS LIVED

Despite our pride and ignorance, Jesus, who created the world and is God, lovingly came into human history as a man ([John 1:14](#); [Rm 1:3](#); [8:3](#); [Gal 4:4](#); [Philemon 2:7](#), [8](#); [Col 1:22](#); [1 Tim 3:16](#); [Heb 2:14](#); [1 Jn 4:2](#); [2 Jn 7](#)). He was born of a virgin, ([Mt 1:23](#); [Is 7:14](#)) and he lived a life without sin, ([Heb 4:15](#); [1 Pt 2:22](#); [1 Jn 3:5](#)) though he was tempted in every way as we are.

Because of his great love for us, he went to the cross and took on the punishment of death that we justly deserved ([Rm 3:25](#); [1 Jn 2:2](#)). Before his death and after his resurrection, he preached that the good news of God's kingdom, love, promise, forgiveness, and acceptance was fulfilled in him, in both his life and death.

JESUS DIED

Our first parents in the garden substituted themselves for God, and, at the cross, Jesus reversed that substitution, substituting himself for sinners ([1 Cor 15:45–48](#)). When Jesus went to the cross, he willingly took upon

himself the sin of those who would come to trust in him. That means that if you trust him as your Lord and Savior, Jesus went to the cross and took upon himself all your sin—past, present, and future—and that he died in your place, paying your debt to God and purchasing your salvation ([Rm 10:9](#); [Mt 10:32](#); [Lk 12:8](#)).

JESUS EXCHANGED

Jesus not only took the punishment for your sin, but he also lived a perfectly righteous life. When you trust in Christ, your sins are forgiven and you are declared righteous by God, the ultimate judge. The righteousness of Christ is attributed to you as if you lived a perfect life. [2 Cor 5:21](#) tells us this: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”

We are the villains, turned into the adopted, children of God.

Martin Luther called this the Great Exchange: “Lord Jesus, you are my righteousness, just as I am your sin. You have taken upon yourself what is mine and have given me what is yours. You have taken upon yourself what you were not and have given to me what I was not.” The famous Christian hymn, “Rock of Ages,” says the same thing: “Be of sin the double cure. Save from wrath and make me pure.”

JESUS ROSE

Jesus’ dead body was then laid in a tomb, where he lay buried for three days. On the third day, Jesus rose in victory over Satan, sin, death, demons, and hell ([Lk 42:1](#); [Mt 28:1–8](#); [Mk 16:1–8](#); [Jn 20:1](#)). After spending some more time eating, drinking, laughing, and teaching with his closest friends (Jn 20-21), he ascended into heaven, and today is alive and well ([Acts 1:6–11](#)).

He is seated on a throne, and he is ruling and reigning over all nations, cultures, philosophies, races, and periods of time. Jesus will come again to judge the living and the dead, and those who trust in him will enjoy eternity in his kingdom of heaven forever. Those who do not will suffer apart from him in the conscious, eternal torments of hell (Rev 21).

He is King of kings and he is Lord of lords ([Rev 17:14](#)), and he is ruling and reigning over all people, commanding everyone everywhere to

repent. And now he commissions us with the Holy Spirit to be missionaries, telling this amazingly good news that there is a God who passionately, lovingly, continually, and relentlessly pursues us.

GOSPEL-CENTERED

To be gospel-centered means to focus on Jesus, who he is and what he has done, not on who we are and what we have done or will do for God. The gospel is the good news about Jesus Christ ([Mk 1:1](#)) who came “to seek and save the lost” ([Lk 19:10](#)).

The gospel is for every one, every day, and every moment.

In [1 Cor 15:4-6](#), Paul declares and defines the gospel clearly: “Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures ... he was buried ... he was raised on the third day ... he appeared.” Paul says these facts are “of first importance” ([1 Cor 15:3](#)).

To hold this gospel message as “of first importance” is what it means for one’s theology to be “gospel-centered.” The gospel should have a central place in Christian theology and ministry. The gospel is clearly the center of the purpose of Jesus’ ministry and the Bible. It should also to be the center of what every Christian and church believes because the gospel is the power of God for salvation to all who believe ([Romans 1:16](#)).

GOD REMAINS FAITHFUL

The focus of the gospel is not on the inadequacy of humankind but rather on the character and glory of God: “If we are faithless, he remains faithful” ([2 Tim 2:13](#)). However, we are transformed when we live “in line with the gospel” ([Gal 2:14](#))—avoiding both legalism and licentiousness—and pursuing the joy found in complete and utter surrender of our unrighteous life in exchange for his righteous life ([Gal 2:20](#)). The gospel is what makes us right with God (justification) and it is also what frees us to delight in God (sanctification). The gospel changes everything.

Calling the gospel the “power of God for the salvation of all who believe” ([Rm 1:16](#)) means that it is the power to accomplish the whole matter of salvation from beginning to end without a scrap of human effort. We cannot and dare not ever move “beyond” the gospel. There is no such “beyond” for Christians, just a “different gospel,” ([Gal 1:6-7](#); [2 Cor 11:4](#); [1](#)

[Tim 1:3](#)) which is not good news at all. Apart from the gospel there is no forgiveness of sins, no hope, and no transformation into Christ's likeness.

A gospel-centered reading of the Bible sees it not as a record of good people earning God's blessing, but bad people receiving God's blessing because Jesus earned it for them. At the center of the Bible is the good news that God treated Jesus the way we deserved and he daily treats us the way Jesus deserved. The center of the Bible is Jesus. He is the hero. We are the villains, turned into the adopted, children of God.

JESUS, NOT RELIGION

Because of the amazing and radical message of the gospel, it's important that we don't confuse the gospel with religion. At The Austin Stone, we intentionally talk about Jesus (who he is and what he has done) all the time. We worship Jesus, not religion. As such we desire to talk more about what Jesus has done rather than what people should do ([Gal 1:6-9](#)).

There is a God who passionately, lovingly, continually, and relentlessly pursues us.

The beauty of the gospel is that once you truly understand what Jesus has done for you, you desire to do what he calls you to do. Trying to do it the other way around is futile.

The message of Jesus was, "Repent!" not, "Be better!" As Martin Luther said in his first of his 95 Theses: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said 'Repent,' he intended that the entire life of believers should be repentance." So, echoing Luther, we affirm that all of the Christian life is repentance. Turning from sin and trusting in the good news that Jesus saves sinners isn't merely a one-time inaugural experience but instead the daily substance of Christianity. The gospel is for every one, every day, and every moment.