

GOD  
IS THE  
GOSPEL

MEDITATIONS ON GOD'S LOVE  
AS THE GIFT OF HIMSELF

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## THE GOSPEL—THE BIBLICAL SCOPE OF ITS MEANING

What we will see in this chapter is how the Bible defines the gospel. But the point of the chapter in the end will be to show that many true and precious aspects of the gospel can be affirmed, and yet the final and greatest good of the gospel be missed. The manifold glories of the gospel are beautiful. But that is just the point. If the overarching beauty is not seen—namely, the beauty of the glory of Christ—then the aim of the gospel is not attained. We will come back to this point at the end of the chapter. For now let us look at the biblical facets of the gospel-diamond, and fix our eyes on the glory they intend to reveal.

### HOW SHALL WE DEFINE THE GOSPEL?

How does the Bible define the gospel? Interestingly the Bible (including the Greek Old Testament<sup>1</sup> and New Testament) uses the noun “gospel” (εὐαγγέλιον) seventy-seven times and the verb for “preach the gospel” (εὐαγγελίζω) seventy-seven times. In the vast majority of these uses the meaning is assumed rather than defined. But there are enough defining uses to give a clear picture of what the gospel is. I have structured this chapter around the uses of the word “gospel” that have definitions (or phrases that function like

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<sup>1</sup> Only one of these uses (εὐαγγελίζομαι) in the Greek Old Testament is not in the Protestant Old Testament (Psalms of Solomon 11:1).

definitions) in the immediate context. The challenge in defining such a common and broad word or phrase like “good news” or “declare good news” is to avoid two extremes. One extreme would be to define the Christian gospel so broadly that everything good in the Christian message is called gospel, and the other would be to define the Christian gospel so narrowly that the definition cannot do justice to all the uses in the New Testament. I hope to find a middle way.

#### THERE IS A LIVING GOD

The gospel includes the good news that there is a living God who created heaven and earth. When Paul and Barnabas came to a city of Asia Minor named Lystra, God enabled them to heal a crippled man. The crowds were stunned and cried out, “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” (Acts 14:11). They called Barnabas Zeus (the king of the gods), and they called Paul Hermes (the messenger of the gods). The priest of Zeus wanted to sacrifice to them.

But at this point Paul began to preach the gospel. He started like this: “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you *good news* [εὐαγγελιζόμενοι], *that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them*” (Acts 14:15). The “good news” includes the truth that there is a living God who created all these things.

There simply can be no good news without a living God who created the universe. No cherished aspect of the Christian gospel would have any redemptive meaning if there were no living God who created heaven and earth. So Luke, the writer of the book of Acts, says that Paul began his gospel message with the good news that there is something vastly greater than what the people of Lystra had dreamed in their religion: there is a God who lives and created all else. That is a foundational stone in the structure of the Christian gospel.

## THE ARRIVAL OF GOD'S IMPERIAL AUTHORITY

The gospel not only includes the truth that God is the Creator who is alive today—it also includes the truth that he is the King of the universe who is now, in Jesus Christ, exerting his imperial authority in the world for the sake of his people. In Romans 10:15 the apostle Paul quotes Isaiah 52:7 to show that his gospel had been predicted by God. “How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings *good news* [εὐαγγελιζομένου], who publishes peace, who brings good news [εὐαγγελιζόμενος] of happiness, who publishes salvation, who says to Zion, ‘*Your God reigns.*’”

Those last words define one foundational part of the good news that Isaiah foretells. “Your God reigns.” God’s sovereign rule is essential to the gospel. Isaiah foresaw the day when God’s sovereign rule over all things would break into this world in a more open way and bring great blessing to the people of God. So when the promised Messiah came into the world, this is the primary way he spoke the gospel. “Jesus came into Galilee, proclaiming *the gospel of God*, and saying, ‘*The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel*’” (Mark 1:14).<sup>2</sup> In other words, the reign of God has broken into this world to set things right for the sake of his people; *therefore* repent and believe this good news. In fact, if you do, you are part of his people. In a world so full of brokenness and sin, there simply can be no good news if God does not break in with kingly authority. If God does not come with sovereign rights as King of the universe, there will be only hopelessness in this world.

## JESUS: A SAVIOR WHO IS CHRIST, THE LORD

As the message and ministry of Jesus Christ unfolded on earth two thousand years ago, it became clear that the arrival of the kingdom

<sup>2</sup> See also Luke 4:43, “He said to them, ‘I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns as well; for I was sent for this purpose.’” Luke 8:1 adds, “Soon afterward he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God.” Luke 16:16 says, “The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it.” For an excellent introduction to the teaching of Jesus on the kingdom of God see George Eldon Ladd, *The Presence of the Future* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996).

of God and the arrival of Jesus were the same. You can see how the gospel was summed up this way in Acts 8:12: “Philip . . . *preached good news* [εὐαγγελιζομένω] *about the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ*, [and] they were baptized, both men and women.” The reason that the coming of the kingdom of God and the coming of Jesus were the same is that Jesus was the long-awaited “son of David.” He was the promised King. The gospel is the good news that the promised King of Israel had come. So Paul opens the book of Romans with this description of the gospel. It is “the *gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον] *of God*, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, *concerning his Son, who was descended from David*” (1:1-3).

When the angels announced Jesus’ arrival at that first Christmas, they put it all together. This was the gospel. It was the arrival of the sovereign King, the Lord. It was the arrival of the promised Messiah (which is what “Christ” means), the Son of David. And with this divine power, and with this royal lineage, the Lord Jesus Christ would become a Savior. “The angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, *I bring you good news* [εὐαγγελίζομαι] of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David *a Savior, who is Christ the Lord*” (Luke 2:10-11). The good news is that the King of the Universe (the Lord), the Messiah (Christ), has come to be a Savior.

#### CHRIST DIED FOR OUR SINS IN ACCORDANCE WITH THE SCRIPTURES

How did Jesus, the Messiah, the Lord of heaven, go on to become a Savior? He tells us clearly: “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). He would die in order to pay a ransom so that many others would not have to perish. Similarly, at the Last Supper he said, “This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood” ( Luke 22:20). In other words, when he sheds his blood, it will be for others, and it will obtain the long-promised “new covenant” that promised, “I will forgive their iniq-

uity, and I will remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:34). That much Jesus made plain.

But it was the apostle Paul who made the link explicit between the word *gospel* and the death of Jesus for our sins. “Now I would remind you, brothers, of the *gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον] I preached [εὐηγγελισάμην] to you. . . . 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 Cor. 15:1-3). The coming of the King, the Lord, the Messiah, was the coming of a Savior because he died to bear our sins, not his own (since he had none, Heb. 4:15). His death was a ransom for us that we could not pay for ourselves.<sup>3</sup>

#### JESUS, RISEN FROM THE DEAD AS PREACHED IN MY GOSPEL

But there would be no gospel if Jesus had stayed dead. Paul made this crystal-clear in 1 Corinthians 15:17, “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins.” This is why Paul’s definition of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 15:1, 3-4 includes both the death and resurrection of Jesus: “I would remind you, brothers, of *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον] . . . that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, *that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.*”

The King would not rule over a ransomed people if he were not raised from the dead. And if the King of kings is not ruling, there is no gospel. Jesus made clear that he would rise from the dead,<sup>4</sup> and Paul made clear that this was an essential part of the gospel: “Remember Jesus Christ, *risen from the dead*, the offspring of David,

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 49:7, 8, 15 says, “Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice. . . . But God will ransom my soul from the power of Sheol, for he will receive me.”

<sup>4</sup> See Matthew 12:40, “For just as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish, so will the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.” Also Mark 8:31, “And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again.” See also Mark 9:31; 10:34. John 2:19, “Jesus answered them, ‘Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.’”

as preached in *my gospel* [εὐαγγέλιόν]” (2 Tim. 2:8).<sup>5</sup> Therefore the living God, the Creator, the King of the universe, has come in his Son, Jesus the Messiah, and has died for our sins and has been raised from the dead. All this is the gospel. But there is more.

#### THE GOSPEL IS NOT GOOD NEWS WITHOUT THE PROMISE OF THE SPIRIT

When John the Baptist preached the gospel, the aspect of it that he emphasized was that the Mighty One who would be coming after him, namely Jesus, would not baptize with water but with the Holy Spirit and fire. He said, “I baptize you with water, but he who is mightier than I is coming, the strap of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie. *He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.*” Then to show that this was part of the gospel Luke said, “So with many other exhortations he *preached good news* [εὐηγγελίζετο] to the people” (Luke 3:16, 18). The word “other” implies that what he had just said was part of the good news and there are “other” things to say as part of the gospel as well.

When Jesus was raised and went back to heaven, he did not leave the disciples without his presence and power—his fellowship and help. He had said to his disciples, “You know [the Spirit of truth] for he dwells with you and will be in you. I will not leave you as orphans; I will come to you” (John 14:17-18). In other words, when the Spirit comes, he will be the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit will be for us the presence and the power of Christ himself. The fellowship of Christ, promised in the gospel, happens by the Spirit’s presence in us.

In the last hours before he left, Jesus confirmed the gospel words of John the Baptist: “Behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with

<sup>5</sup> See also Acts 13:32-33, “We bring you the good news [εὐαγγελιζόμεθα] that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children *by raising Jesus.*” The definition Paul gave of the gospel in Romans 1:1-4 includes the resurrection: “. . . the gospel [εὐαγγέλιον] of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy Scriptures, concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh *and was declared to be the Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord.*”

power from on high. . . . John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now . . . you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you” (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:5, 8). The Holy Spirit is the down payment, a guarantee of the fullness of joy we will know in the perfected fellowship with the Father and the Son in the age to come (2 Cor. 1:22; 5:5). What makes the gospel good news in the end is the enjoyment of the glory of God in Christ. The Holy Spirit provides the present experience of that enjoyment. Therefore the promise of the Spirit in the gospel is what makes it good news.

#### THE PROMISE OF SALVATION FOR ALL WHO BELIEVE

On the basis of all that news—news of things God has already done in Christ without yet any effect in us—now the Bible speaks of the *effects* or the *accomplishments* of those events as good news. One of the most encompassing words to describe the good news of what God does *for* us and *in* us is *salvation*. Paul refers to “the gospel of your salvation” in Ephesians 1:13. “In him you also, when you heard the word of truth, *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον] *of your salvation*, and believed in him, were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit.”

Paul says in Romans 1:16, “I am not ashamed of *the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον], for it is the power of God *for salvation* to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.” How then should we speak of salvation in relation to the gospel? Should we speak of salvation only as the result of the gospel or as part of the gospel? The text says that the gospel is the power of God *for* salvation. Some might therefore conclude that salvation is not part of the gospel.

The trouble here is that we need to distinguish the *experience* of salvation in particular persons and the *promise* of salvation through believing in Christ. The actual experience of a particular person’s being saved is not part of the gospel. But that experience happens when the person believes the gospel, and part of what they believe is the promise that on the basis of the death and resurrection of Jesus they *will* be saved. So the way we should say it is that the *promise*



of salvation *is* part of the gospel, but the actual *experience* of salvation in particular persons is not part of the gospel, but the result of the gospel. What Romans 1:16 makes plain is that “to everyone who believes,” the promise of salvation becomes personally true for them. So, yes, the gospel is the good news that, because of the death and resurrection of Jesus, salvation comes to believers. Therefore, it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes.

This all-encompassing word, *salvation*, embraces all the gospel promises, such as the promise of healing, help for the poor, liberty for captives, peace, eternal life, global expanse, and the all-satisfying vision of the glory of God.

#### WHAT THE CROSS PURCHASED MAKES THE CROSS GOOD NEWS

When Jesus healed the sick and cast out demons and raised the dead and helped the poor, he was demonstrating what made “the gospel of the kingdom” good news. “He went throughout all Galilee, teaching in their synagogues and *proclaiming the gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον] *of the kingdom and healing every disease* and every affliction among the people” (Matt. 4:23). As he opened his ministry in Nazareth, Jesus said, “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me *to proclaim good news* [εὐαγγελίσασθαι] *to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed*” (Luke 4:18). These were the kinds of blessings that mark the reign of God in this age partly, and in the age to come completely.

What the progress of revelation shows, as the New Testament unfolds, is that the death and resurrection of Christ to cover our sins is the foundation for all these blessings that the gospel of the kingdom announces. The King must die before he reigns. Otherwise the justice of his reign would only bring judgment and not salvation. So all the kingdom blessings demonstrated in the Gospels had to be purchased by the blood of Christ. This is why the cross must ever be the center and foundation of the gospel and why the blessings of the gospel should only be called gospel in relation to the cross.

### THE GOOD NEWS OF PEACE WITH GOD AND EACH OTHER

Alongside healing and help for the poor and liberty for the captives proclaimed by Jesus as good news, Paul and Peter speak of peace with God and eternal life and global expanse as part of what the good news is. For example, Peter described the gospel that God sent through Jesus as “the word that [God] sent to Israel, *preaching good news* [εὐαγγελιζόμενος] *of peace* through Jesus Christ” (Acts 10:36). And Paul spoke of having our feet shod with “the readiness given by *the gospel* [εὐαγγελίου] *of peace*” (Eph. 6:15). This peace that the gospel promises and creates is first between man and God (Rom. 5:10; 2 Cor. 5:18), and secondly between people. When different ethnic groups share a common vertical reconciliation, it produces a horizontal one (Eph. 2:14-18).

### THE GOOD NEWS PROMISES ETERNAL LIFE

The effect of this peace with God is eternal life. This too is what makes the gospel of Christ good news. Paul says in 2 Timothy 1:10: “[God’s grace] has been manifested through the appearing of our Savior Christ Jesus, who abolished death and *brought life and immortality to light through the gospel* [εὐαγγελίου].” The gospel makes clear what God has achieved in the death and resurrection of Jesus, literally, “life and incorruptibility.” William Mounce says that “‘incorruptibility’ [ἀφθαρσίαν], when joined with ζωή, ‘life,’ is synonymous with eternal life.”<sup>6</sup> I think that’s right. The reason the gospel brings eternal life to light is that it makes crystal-clear *why* eternal life is possible (the death and resurrection of Jesus) and *what* eternal life will be (life with the risen Christ).

### “IN YOU SHALL ALL THE NATIONS BE BLESSED”

The good news of all that Christ achieved when he died and rose again embraces all the peoples of the earth. This is not just a com-

<sup>6</sup> William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles, Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 46 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 485.

ment about how far the good news reaches. This is part of what makes the good news good. The gospel of the kingdom would not be good news if the King did not rule among all the peoples. Paul explicitly identifies the blessing of the nations as part of the gospel. For example, in Galatians 3:8 he says, “The Scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, *preached the gospel beforehand* [προεσηγγερίσατο] to Abraham, saying, ‘*In you shall all the nations be blessed.*’” Preaching the gospel means announcing the good news that all the nations will be blessed through Abraham—that is, through the death and resurrection of Abraham’s seed, Jesus Christ (Gal. 3:16).

The gospel message includes the truth “that *the Gentiles are fellow heirs*, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus *through the gospel* [εὐαγγελίου]” (Eph. 3:6). The fact that the salvation of the nations happens “through the gospel” does not mean that the gospel is defined without the promise of that salvation. It means that the promise of global Gentile salvation, based on the death and resurrection of Jesus, is the means of bringing that salvation about. The *actual* salvation of the nations comes through the blood-bought *promise* of Gentile salvation in the gospel. If the gospel were parochial, it would not be the gospel.

#### “THE GOSPEL OF THE GRACE OF GOD”

The gospel contains the news of its ground. The ground of all the good news is God’s grace. This is why Paul calls his message “the gospel of the grace of God.” One of his most moving testimonies is found with these very words in Acts 20:24, “I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the *gospel* [εὐαγγέλιον] *of the grace of God.*” More than once the gospel is called “the word of his grace” (Acts 14:3; 20:32). The gospel is the good news of what God’s grace promises to sinners and how he achieves it through Christ.

Grace is the free blessing of God that flows from his heart to guilty, undeserving sinners. Therefore in relation to our salvation it

is the opposite of human initiative or merit. This is what Paul means with his fundamental statement, “It is no longer on the basis of works; otherwise grace would no longer be grace” (Rom. 11:6). In this statement he was referring to our being chosen by God: “There is a remnant, *chosen* by grace” (Rom. 11:5), or literally, “a remnant according to the *election* of grace.” Before we had done anything good or evil, God chose us in Christ. The freedom of grace is stressed because its origin is in eternity where we were chosen: “He chose us in him *before the foundation of the world* . . . to the praise of his glorious *grace*” (Eph. 1:4, 6). God’s grace is the ground of all gospel blessings.

#### JESUS’ DEATH MAKES GOD’S GOSPEL GRACE JUST

The decisive act of God’s grace was the central gospel event of Christ’s coming and suffering: “You know *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ*, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). Jesus suffered and died “so that *by the grace of God* he might taste death for everyone” (Heb. 2:9). The death of Jesus in our place was the act of God’s grace that makes all acts of grace righteous in God’s sight. It is not obvious that acquitting the guilty is a righteous thing for a judge to do (“He who justifies the wicked and he who condemns the righteous are both alike an abomination to the LORD,” Prov. 17:15). Therefore since God is just as well as gracious, he sent Christ to bear the just punishment for sin, so that he might “show God’s righteousness” (Rom. 3:25). “It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus” (Rom. 3:26). Therefore God is just in being gracious in the gospel.

#### THE GRACE OF THE GOSPEL IS THE GROUND OF EVERY GOOD PROMISE

From this central act of gospel grace flows a mighty river of gracious gospel blessings. The calling of God that wakened us from our sin-

soaked sleep of death was owing to grace. God “*called* us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of his own purpose and *grace*” (2 Tim. 1:9). We responded in faith not because our wills were by nature compliant. Rather we believed because God’s grace enabled us to believe. “*By grace* you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God” (Eph. 2:8). “The *grace* of our Lord overflowed for me with the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus” (1 Tim. 1:14). When Apollos worked in Achaia, Luke says, “he greatly helped those who *through grace* had believed” (Acts 18:27). That any of us has believed is owing to the mighty work of God’s grace—the grace made possible by the blood of Christ. And this blood-bought grace is essential to what makes the good news good.

In the presence of this gracious gift of faith, God *justifies* us “by his grace” (Rom. 3:24; Tit. 3:7) and *forgives* our trespasses “according to the riches of his grace” (Eph. 1:7) and *saves* us “through the grace of the Lord Jesus” (Acts 15:11) and “makes all grace abound” to us for “*every good work*” (2 Cor. 9:8) and makes his grace sufficient for all our *affliction* (2 Cor. 12:9) and enables us “by the grace of God” to *work harder* than we imagined we could (1 Cor. 15:10) and grants “grace to *help* in time of need” (Heb. 4:16) and gives us “eternal *comfort* and good *hope* through grace” (2 Thess. 2:16), so that in the end “the name of our Lord *Jesus may be glorified* in you, and *you in him*, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:12).

In other words, every blessing that comes to redeemed sinners comes on the ground and by the power of God’s grace. By grace God sent the Son to die, and by that death everything we need in order to be eternally happy in God is ours. “He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32). The gospel is the good news that because God did not spare Christ, he will not spare any omnipotent effort to give us everything that is good for us.

NO GOOD THING IN THE GOSPEL IS GOOD WITHOUT  
THE FINAL SUPREME GOOD: GOD

Now the point of this book must be pressed. The point is that the precious gospel events and gospel blessings that I have outlined in this chapter do not suffice to make the gospel good news. What makes the gospel finally and supremely good news has not yet been mentioned. We saw a glimpse of it in the section on the Holy Spirit when I said:

When the Spirit comes, he will be the Spirit of Christ. The Spirit will be for us the presence and the power of Christ himself. The fellowship of Christ, promised in the gospel, happens by the Spirit's presence in us. . . . What makes the gospel good news in the end is the enjoyment of the glory of God in Christ. The Holy Spirit provides the present experience of that enjoyment. Therefore the promise of the Spirit in the gospel is what makes it good news.

Another brief glimpse happened when I observed that the gospel gives us “good *hope* through grace” (2 Thess. 2:16), so that in the end “the name of our Lord Jesus may be glorified in you, and you in him, according to the grace of our God and the Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Thess. 1:12).

But for the most part the good things mentioned in this chapter as essential parts of the gospel are not the final good of the gospel and would not prove to be good for us at all if the unmentioned supreme good were not seen and embraced. That good is God himself seen and savored in all his glory. Focusing on facets of a diamond without seeing the beauty of the whole is demeaning to the diamond. If the hearers of the gospel do not see the glory of Christ, the image of God, in all the events and gifts of the gospel, they do not see what finally makes the gospel good news. If you embrace everything that I have mentioned in this chapter about the facets of the gospel, but do it in a way that does not make the glory of God in Christ your supreme treasure, then you have not embraced the gospel.

Until the gospel *events* of Good Friday and Easter and the

gospel *promises* of justification and eternal life lead you to behold and embrace *God himself* as your highest joy, you have not embraced the gospel of God. You have embraced some of his gifts. You have rejoiced over some of his rewards. You have marveled at some of his miracles. But you have not yet been awakened to why the gifts, the rewards, and the miracles have come. They have come for one great reason: that you might behold forever the glory of God in Christ, and by beholding become the kind of person who delights in God above all things, and by delighting display his supreme beauty and worth with ever-increasing brightness and bliss forever.

Which leads us now in the next chapter to talk about the ultimate goal of the gospel—the ultimate *good* that the *good* news offers. I have named it, but now I must show it from the Scriptures.

## THE GOSPEL—“BEHOLD YOUR GOD!”

In the last chapter we unfolded the broader biblical meaning of the Christian gospel. It included the existence of the living God and his coming into history with imperial authority over all things as the long-awaited King of Israel and Lord of the universe. This King was Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Savior. He fulfilled the Old Testament expectations of the Son of David, died for our sins, was buried, and rose again triumphant over Satan, death, and hell. He promised his own Spirit to be with us and help us. On the basis of his death and resurrection, the gospel promises a great salvation—eventual healing from disease and liberation from oppression, peace with God and others who believe, justification by faith apart from works of the law, forgiveness of sins, transformation into the image of Christ, eternal life, and the global inclusion of all people from all nations in this salvation.

### CHRIST SUFFERED TO BRING US TO GOD

But the point was made that the final and greatest good of the gospel is not included in that array of gospel gifts. My burden in this book is to make as clear as I can that preachers can preach on these great aspects of the gospel and yet never take people to the goal of the gospel. Preachers can say dozens of true and wonderful things about the gospel and not lead people to where the gospel is leading.



People can hear the gospel preached, or read it in their Bibles, and not see the final aim of the gospel that makes the good news good.

What makes all the events of Good Friday and Easter and all the promises they secure good news is that they lead us to God. “Christ also suffered once for sins, the righteous for the unrighteous, *that he might bring us to God*” (1 Pet. 3:18). And when we get there, it is God himself who will satisfy our souls forever. Everything else in the gospel is meant to display God’s glory and remove every obstacle in him (such as his wrath) and in us (such as our rebellion) so that we can enjoy him forever. God is the gospel. That is, he is what makes the good news good. Nothing less can make the gospel good news. God is the final and highest gift that makes the good news good. Until people use the gospel to get to God, they use it wrongly.

#### JUSTIFICATION DEALS WITH OUR GREATEST PROBLEM

Before we spread out the biblical support for this claim, let me try to show how even some of the brightest facets of the gospel-diamond can so fixate our attention that we do not see the glory of God reflected in the entire diamond itself.

Take justification, for example. Few facets of the gospel are more precious to me than this. I wrote a whole book to show why this doctrine is the heart of the gospel and why it includes the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to us by faith alone apart from works of the law.<sup>1</sup> I won’t go into that defense here except to quote some proven voices. For example, G. C. Berkouwer wrote, “The confession of divine justification touches man’s life at its heart, at the point of its relationship to God. It defines the preaching of the Church, the existence and progress of the life of faith, the root of human security and man’s perspective for the future.”<sup>2</sup>

The most fundamental need of man that the gospel addresses is addressed by the gift of justification. We are not merely alienated

<sup>1</sup> John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ: Should We Abandon the Imputation of Christ’s Righteousness?* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> G. C. Berkouwer, *Faith and Justification* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1954), 17.

from God but are under his wrath (John 3:36; Rom. 1:18; 5:9; Gal. 3:10). This means that what must change fundamentally is God's anger toward us because of our God-dishonoring sin (Rom. 3:23). We are not capable of changing God. We cannot pay our own debt. "Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life" (Ps. 49:7). Therefore, in his great mercy, God intervened to put Christ forward as the propitiation of God's own wrath (Rom. 3:25). Christ absorbed the curse that we deserved (Gal. 3:13). "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree" (1 Pet. 2:24).

#### THE GREAT EXCHANGE

But not only are our sins counted as his, his righteousness is counted as ours. This has been called "the great exchange." For example, J. I. Packer writes, "The judge declares guilty sinners immune from punishment and righteous in his sight. The *great exchange* is no legal fiction, no arbitrary pretence, no mere word-game on God's part, but a costly achievement."<sup>3</sup> The biblical statement of "the great exchange" is 2 Corinthians 5:21, "For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Thus justification has these two sides: the removal of sin because Christ bears our curse, and the imputation of righteousness because we are in Christ and his righteousness is counted as ours.<sup>4</sup> Thus Calvin defines justification as "the acceptance with which God receives us into his favor as righteous men. And we say that it consists in the remission of sins and the imputation of Christ's righteousness."<sup>5</sup> Similarly Luther (who called the doctrine of justification the belief that determines whether the church stands or falls<sup>6</sup>) affirmed both these aspects of justification: "Christ took all

<sup>3</sup> J. I. Packer, "Justification in Protestant Theology," in *Honoring the People of God, the Collected Shorter Writings of J. I. Packer*, 4 vols. (Carlisle, Cumbria, UK: Paternoster, 1999), 4:227. Emphasis added.

<sup>4</sup> To defend this statement was the burden of the book cited above: John Piper, *Counted Righteous in Christ*.

<sup>5</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2 vols., ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960), 1:727 (III.11.2).

<sup>6</sup> Cited in Packer, "Justification in Protestant Theology," 19.

our sins upon him, and for them died upon the cross,” and “they are righteous because they believe in Christ, whose righteousness covers them and is imputed to them.”<sup>7</sup>

#### JUSTIFICATION IS THE HEART OF THE GOSPEL, NOT ITS HIGHEST GOOD

Therefore, Protestants have viewed the doctrine of justification (by grace alone, through faith alone, on the basis of Christ’s blood and righteousness alone, for the glory of God alone, as taught with final authority in Scripture alone) as “the heart of the biblical Gospel.”<sup>8</sup> I agree with that judgment. I am thrilled to call justification the heart of the gospel. But figurative language (like “heart” and “center”) is ambiguous. What does it mean? By “heart” I mean that justification addresses the main problem between God and man most directly (see above) and becomes, therefore, the sustaining source of all the other benefits of the gospel.

That gives a special edge to the key question of this book: Why is justification good news? What is good about being justified by faith alone? Or more broadly, why is the gospel, which has justification by faith at its heart, good news? Now this question is seldom asked, because being forgiven for our sins and being acquitted in court for capital crimes and being counted righteous before a holy God is so manifestly a happy situation that it seems impertinent to ask, why is it good news?

But I believe we must emphatically ask this question. For the answer to it is infinitely important. Every person should be required to answer the question, “Why is it good news to you that your sins are forgiven?” “Why is it good news to you that you stand righteous in the courtroom of the Judge of the universe?” The reason this must be asked is that there are seemingly biblical answers that totally

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 225-226.

<sup>8</sup> “The heart of the biblical Gospel was to [the Reformers] God’s free gift of righteousness and justification. Here was the sum and substance of that *sola fide—sola gratia—solo Christo—sola Scriptura—soli Deo gloria*, which was the sustained theme of their proclamation, polemics, praises and prayers.” *Ibid.*, 219.

ignore the gift of God himself. A person may answer, “Being forgiven is good news because I don’t want to go to hell.” Or a person may answer, “Being forgiven is good news because a guilty conscience is a horrible thing, and I get great relief when I believe my sins are forgiven.” Or a person may answer, “I want to go to heaven.” But then we must ask *why* they want to go to heaven. They might answer, “Because the alternative is painful.” Or “because my deceased wife is there.” Or “because there will be a new heaven and a new earth where justice and beauty will finally be everywhere.”

What’s wrong with these answers? It’s true that no one should want to go to hell. Forgiveness does indeed relieve a guilty conscience. In heaven we will be restored to loved ones who died in Christ, and we will escape the pain of hell and enjoy the justice and the beauty of the new earth. All that is true. So what’s wrong with those answers? What’s wrong with them is that they do not treat God as the final and highest good of the gospel. They do not express a supreme desire to be with God. God was not even mentioned. Only his gifts were mentioned. These gifts are precious. But they are not God. And they are not the gospel if God himself is not cherished as the supreme gift of the gospel. That is, if God is not treasured as the ultimate gift of the gospel, none of his gifts will be gospel, good news. And if God is treasured as the supremely valuable gift of the gospel, then all the other lesser gifts will be enjoyed as well.

Justification is not an end in itself. Neither is the forgiveness of sins or the imputation of righteousness. Neither is escape from hell or entrance into heaven or freedom from disease or liberation from bondage or eternal life or justice or mercy or the beauties of a pain-free world. None of these facets of the gospel-diamond is the chief good or highest goal of the gospel. Only one thing is: seeing and savoring God himself, being changed into the image of his Son so that more and more we delight in and display God’s infinite beauty and worth.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> See Chapter 11 for the explanation of the relationship between the goal of seeing God and the goal of being like God.

## WHY DO I WANT TO BE FORGIVEN?

Consider an illustration of what I am trying to say. Suppose I get up in the morning and as I am walking to the bathroom I trip over some of my wife's laundry that she left lying on the hall floor. Instead of simply moving the laundry myself and assuming the best in her, I react in a way that is all out of proportion to the situation and say something very harsh to my wife just as she is waking up. She gets up, puts the laundry away, and walks downstairs ahead of me. I can tell by the silence and from my own conscience that our relationship is in serious trouble.

As I go downstairs my conscience is condemning me. Yes, the laundry should not have been there. Yes, I might have broken my neck. But those thoughts are mainly the self-defending flesh talking. The truth is that my words were way out of line. Not only was the emotional harshness out of proportion to the seriousness of the fault, but the Bible tells me to overlook the fault. "Why not rather suffer wrong? Why not rather be defrauded?" (1 Cor. 6:7).

So as I enter the kitchen there is ice in the air, and her back is blatantly toward me as she works at the kitchen counter. What needs to happen here? The answer is plain: I need to apologize and ask for forgiveness. That would be the right thing to do. But here's the analogy: Why do I want her forgiveness? So that she will make my favorite breakfast? So that my guilt feelings will go away and I will be able to concentrate at work today? So there will be good sex tonight? So the kids won't see us at odds? So that she will finally admit the laundry shouldn't have been there?

It may be that every one of those desires would come true. But they are all defective motives for wanting her forgiveness. What's missing is this: I want to be forgiven so that I will have the sweet fellowship of my wife back. She is the reason I want to be forgiven. I want the relationship restored. Forgiveness is simply a way of getting obstacles out of the way so that we can look at each other again with joy.

WOULD YOU BE HAPPY IN HEAVEN IF GOD  
WERE NOT THERE?

My point in this book is that all the saving events and all the saving blessings of the gospel are means of getting obstacles out of the way so that we might know and enjoy God most fully. Propitiation, redemption, forgiveness, imputation, sanctification, liberation, healing, heaven—none of these is good news except for one reason: they bring us to God for our everlasting enjoyment of him. If we believe all these things have happened to us, but do not embrace them for the sake of getting to God, they have not happened to us. Christ did not die to forgive sinners who go on treasuring anything above seeing and savoring God. And people who would be happy in heaven if Christ were not there, will not be there. The gospel is not a way to get people to heaven; it is a way to get people to God. It's a way of overcoming every obstacle to everlasting joy in God. If we don't want God above all things, we have not been converted by the gospel.

WHAT IS THE SUPREME GOOD THAT MAKES THE  
GOSPEL GOOD NEWS?

So now we must turn to the biblical basis for this truth. We have seen the broad biblical definition of the gospel, and have focused on the heart of the gospel in justification. Now we must inquire: What is the ultimate good of the gospel? What is its goal? What supreme good makes all the other aspects of the gospel good?

For this we turn first to a great Old Testament declaration of the gospel found in Isaiah 40:9: "Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news [ὁ εὐαγγελιζόμενος, LXX]; lift up your voice with strength, O Jerusalem, herald of good news [ὁ εὐαγγελιζόμενος, LXX]; lift it up, fear not; say to the cities of Judah, '*Behold your God!*'"

THE GREAT GOSPEL LONGING: SHOW ME YOUR GLORY

The ultimate good made possible by the death and resurrection of Christ, and offered in the gospel, is: "Behold your God!" Moses had pleaded for this gift as he wrestled for God's presence for the jour-

ney to the Promised Land: “Moses said, ‘Please *show me your glory*’” (Ex. 33:18). King David expressed the uniqueness of this blessing in Psalm 27: “One thing have I asked of the LORD, that will I seek after: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, *to gaze upon the beauty of the LORD* and to inquire in his temple. . . . You have said, ‘Seek my face.’ My heart says to you, ‘*Your face, LORD, do I seek*’” (vv. 4, 8). The memory of these encounters with God sustains David in his afflictions: “O God, you are my God; earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. *So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory*” (Ps. 63:1-2).

We know that seeing God is in two senses impossible: *morally* we are not good enough in our fallen condition and would be consumed in the fire of his holiness if we saw him fully for who he is. This is why God showed Moses his “back” and not his face: “You cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live” (Ex. 33:20). So God put Moses in a rock, passed by, and said, “You shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen” (v. 23).

But the impossibility of seeing God is not just because of our moral condition. It is also because he is God and we are not. This seems to be the meaning of 1 Timothy 6:16: “[He] alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.” Created beings simply cannot look on the Creator and see him for who he is.<sup>10</sup>

Therefore the gazing on God in the Old Testament was mediated. There was something in between. God revealed himself in

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<sup>10</sup> I take the passages of Scripture that seem like exceptions to this (like Genesis 32:30, “Jacob called the name of the place Peniel, saying, ‘For I have seen God face to face, and yet my life has been delivered!’”) as statements along the lines of Psalm 27:4, 8 where seeing God’s face means seeing reflections and evidences of his brightness and favor. Some of these reflections of God are so remarkable that witnesses speak of seeing God himself—but we need not think they mean with no mediator at all. John Sailhamer comments on Genesis 32:30, “Jacob’s remark did not necessarily mean that the ‘man’ with whom Jacob wrestled was in fact God. Rather, as with other similar statements (e.g., Judg 13:22), when one saw the ‘angel of the LORD,’ it was appropriate to say that he had seen the face of God.” *Genesis, in The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, 12 vols., ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1990), 1:210.

deeds (Ps. 77:11-13) and visionary forms (e.g., Ezek. 1:28) and nature (Ps. 19:1) and angels (Judges 13:21-22) and especially by his word: "The LORD *appeared* again at Shiloh, for the LORD *revealed himself* to Samuel at Shiloh *by the word of the LORD*" (1 Sam. 3:21).

THE GLORY OF THE LORD SHALL BE REVEALED—  
IN JESUS CHRIST

But the day would come when the glory of the Lord would be revealed and seen in a new way. This was the greatest hope and expectation in the Old Testament. "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. And *the glory of the LORD* shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the LORD has spoken'" (Isa. 40:3-5). "Arise, shine, for your light has come, and *the glory of the LORD* has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the LORD will arise upon you, and *his glory will be seen upon you*. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising" (Isa. 60:1-3). "The time is coming to gather all nations and tongues. And they shall come and shall *see my glory*" (Isa. 66:18).

This day dawned with the coming of Jesus. He was the Word of God and was truly God and was the incarnate manifestation of the glory of God. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and *we have seen his glory*, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1, 14). When he worked his wonders, the glory that people saw, if they believed, was the glory of God. Jesus said to Martha, just before he raised her brother Lazarus from the dead, "Did I not tell you that if you believed you would *see the glory of God?*" (John 11:40).



MORE OF GOD APPEARED THAN THE  
PROPHETS DREAMED

The glory of the Lord has risen upon the world more fully and wonderfully than the prophets imagined. They knew that the Messiah would come and that he would manifest the righteousness and faithfulness of God as never before. But they could not see plainly,<sup>11</sup> as we can see, that in Jesus “the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9), that he is in the Father and the Father is in him, and the two are one (John 10:30, 38). They would have been stunned speechless to hear Jesus say to Philip, “Have I been with you so long, and you still do not know me, Philip? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, ‘Show us the Father?’” (John 14:9). Or to hear Jesus say the simple and breathtaking words, “Before Abraham was, I am” (John 8:58).

This is why the apostle Paul called Jesus “the Christ who is *God over all*, blessed forever” (Rom. 9:5), and why he described Christ in his incarnation as being “*in the form of God*” (Phil. 2:6).<sup>12</sup> But Jesus did not “count *equality with God* a thing to be grasped.” That is, he did not demand that he hold on to all its manifestations and avoid the humiliation of the incarnation. Rather he was willing to lay down the outward manifestations of deity and take the form of a servant and be born in the likeness of men (Phil. 2:6-7). This is why Paul described Jesus’ second coming as “the appearing of the glory of *our great God* and Savior Jesus Christ” (Tit. 2:13).

<sup>11</sup> First Peter 1:10-11 says, “Concerning this salvation, the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories.”

<sup>12</sup> Being in the “form of God” (ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ) does *not* mean that he is *only* in the “form” of God and therefore not really God. “Form” (μορφῇ) gets its meaning from the following phrase, “equality with God” (ἴσα θεῷ) and from the human counterpart language in Philippians 2:7, “taking the *form* of a servant, being born in the *likeness* of men” (μορφῆν δούλου λαβών, ἐν ὁμοιώματι ἀνθρώπων). The parallel language is to show that Christ was really man and was really God. See one of the most exhaustive studies of this crucial text, Ralph P. Martin, *CARMEN CHRISTI: Philippians 2:5-11 in Recent Interpretation and in the Setting of Early Christian Worship* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 1967).

This is why we find in the book of Hebrews these stunning words about Jesus, "But of the Son [God] says, 'Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.' . . . And, 'You, Lord, laid the foundation of the earth in the beginning, and the heavens are the work of your hands" (1:8, 10). We may conclude from these and other words about Jesus that the time finally arrived for the revelation of God in a way no one had fully dreamed: God himself, the divine Son, would become man. And human beings would see the glory of God in a way they had never seen it before. Formerly, the Bible says, God spoke by prophets, but in these last days—the days since Jesus came—God "has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world. *He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature*, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power" (Heb. 1:2-3). When we see Jesus, we see the glory of God as in no other manifestation.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE EXCELLENCY OF CHRIST THAT NOT EVERYONE SAW

Of course, there were many who saw Jesus and did not see the glory of God. They saw a glutton and a drunkard (Matt. 11:19). They saw Beelzebul, the prince of demons (Matt. 10:25; 12:24). They saw an impostor (Matt. 27:63). "Seeing they do not see, and hearing they do not hear" (Matt. 13:13). The glory of God in the life and ministry of Jesus was not the blinding glory that we will see when he comes the second time with "his face . . . like the sun shining in full strength" (Rev. 1:16; cf. Luke 9:29). His glory, in his first coming, was the incomparably exquisite array of spiritual, moral, intellectual, verbal, and practical perfections that manifest themselves in a kind of meek miracle-working and

<sup>13</sup> When the Bible says that "The heavens declare the glory of God" (Ps. 19:1), it means something fundamentally different from when it says that Christ is the radiance of God's glory. Nowhere does the Bible say or hint that nature is God. But frequently the Bible says and shows that Jesus is God.

unanswerable teaching and humble action that set Jesus apart from all men.<sup>14</sup>

What I am trying to express here is that the glory of Christ, as he appeared among us, consisted not in one attribute or another, and not in one act or another, but in what Jonathan Edwards called “an admirable conjunction of diverse excellencies.”<sup>15</sup> In a sermon titled “The Excellency of Christ” Edwards took as his text Revelation 5:5-6 where Christ is compared both to a lion and a lamb. His point was that the unique glory of Christ was that such diverse excellencies (lion and lamb) unite in him. These excellencies are so diverse that they “would have seemed to us utterly incompatible in the same subject.”<sup>16</sup> In other words,

- we admire him for his glory, but even more because his glory is mingled with humility;
- we admire him for his transcendence, but even more because his transcendence is accompanied by condescension;
- we admire him for his uncompromising justice, but even more because it is tempered with mercy;
- we admire him for his majesty, but even more because it is a majesty in meekness;
- we admire him because of his equality with God, but even more because as God’s equal he nevertheless has a deep reverence for God;

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<sup>14</sup> Commenting on Peter’s assurance of faith after seeing the outward glory of Christ on the mount of transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-9), where, Peter said, “we were eyewitnesses of his majesty” (2 Pet. 1:16), Jonathan Edwards explains the difference between this “outward glory” and the “spiritual glory” that one sees with the eyes of the heart: “If a sight of Christ’s outward glory might give a rational assurance of his divinity, why may not an apprehension of his spiritual glory do so too? Doubtless Christ’s spiritual glory is in itself as distinguishing, and as plainly showing his divinity, as his outward glory; and a great deal more: for his spiritual glory is that wherein his divinity consists; and the outward glory of his transfiguration showed him to be divine, only as it was a remarkable image or representation of that spiritual glory. Doubtless therefore he that has had a clear sight of the spiritual glory of Christ, may say, ‘I have not followed cunningly devised fables, but have been an eyewitness of his majesty,’ upon as good grounds as the Apostle, when he had respect to the outward glory of Christ, that he had seen.” “A Divine and Supernatural Light,” in *Sermons and Discourses 1730-1733*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 17, ed. Mark Valeri (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1999), 419.

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Edwards, “The Excellency of Christ,” in *Sermons And Discourses 1734-1738*, in *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, vol. 19, ed. M. X. Lesser (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2001), 565.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

- we admire him because of how worthy he was of all good, but even more because this was accompanied by an amazing patience to suffer evil;
- we admire him because of his sovereign dominion over the world, but even more because this dominion was clothed with a spirit of obedience and submission;
- we love the way he stumped the proud scribes with his wisdom, and we love it even more because he could be simple enough to like children and spend time with them;
- and we admire him because he could still the storm, but even more because he refused to use that power to strike the Samaritans with lightning (Luke 9:54-55) and he refused to use it to get himself down from the cross.

The list could go on and on. But this is enough to illustrate that beauty and excellency in Christ is not a simple thing. It is complex. It is a coming together in one person of the perfect balance and proportion of extremely diverse qualities. And that's what makes Jesus Christ uniquely glorious, excellent, and admirable. The human heart was made to stand in awe of such ultimate excellence. We were made to admire Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

#### SEEING THEY DID NOT SEE, BECAUSE THEY LOVED THE GLORY OF MEN

But not everyone saw. Having eyes some did not see. But those who had eyes to see saw the glory of God when Christ was on the earth. Jesus said that only those who believe can see this glory. For example, when Martha worried that her dead brother would not be raised by Jesus, he said, "Did I not tell you that *if you believed* you would see the glory of God?" (John 11:40). Some saw Lazarus raised from the dead, but did not see the glory of God.<sup>17</sup> "Many of the Jews

<sup>17</sup> "The real meaning of what He would do is accessible only to faith. All there, believing or not, would see the miracle. But Jesus is promising Martha a sight of the glory." Leon Morris, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1971), 560. "What he intended to convey was this, that if Martha would only stop thinking about that corpse and would rivet her

therefore, who had come with Mary and had seen what [Jesus] did, believed in him, *but some of them went to the Pharisees and told them what Jesus had done*" (John 11:45-46).<sup>18</sup>

The glory of Christ is not synonymous with raw power. The glory is the divine beauty of his manifold perfections. To see this requires a change of heart. Jesus makes that clear when he asks, "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?" (John 5:44). The natural self-centered condition of human hearts cannot believe, because they cannot see spiritual beauty. It is not a *physical* inability, as though they can't act even if they have a compelling desire to act. It is a *moral* inability because they are so self-absorbed, they are unable to see what would condemn their pride and give them joy through admiring another. That is why seeing the glory of Christ requires a profound spiritual change.

#### UNLESS YOU ARE BORN AGAIN YOU CANNOT SEE

So when the disciples do see the glory of Christ and believe in him, Jesus says, "Blessed are your eyes, for they see, and your ears, for they hear" (Matt. 13:16). There is a special work of grace—a special blessedness—that changes our hearts and enables us to see spiritual glory. When Peter said to Jesus, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God," he had seen the glory of Christ and believed. To this Jesus responded, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 16:16-17).

This is what Jesus meant when he said, "Unless one is born again he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). "That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit"

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attention on Jesus, trusting completely in him (his power and his love), she would see this miracle as a true sign, an illustration and proof of the glory of God reflected in the Son of God." William Hendriksen, *The Gospel of John* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1954), 158.

<sup>18</sup> "One might charitably hope that the motive of at least some of them was to win the Pharisees to the truth, but the contrast set up between those who believe and those who go to the Pharisees suggests that their intent was more malicious." D. A. Carson, *The Gospel According to John* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1991), 419.

(John 3:6). When we are born again by the Spirit of God, our spirits are made alive, and we are able to perceive self-authenticating spiritual beauty in the person and work of Christ.<sup>19</sup>

#### SEEING THE GLORY OF CHRIST HAS ITS UPS AND DOWNS

The ability to see spiritual beauty is not unwavering. There are ups and downs in our fellowship with Christ. There are times of beclouded vision, especially if sin gets the upper hand in our lives for a season. "Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God" (Matt. 5:8). Yes, and this is not an all-or-nothing reality. There are degrees of purity and degrees of seeing. Only when we are perfected in the age to come will our seeing be totally unclouded. "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I have been fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

This is why Paul prayed the way he did for the believers of Ephesus. "[May God] give you a spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him, having *the eyes of your hearts enlightened*, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe" (Eph. 1:17-19). Notice Paul's distinction between the eyes of the head and the eyes of the heart. There is a heart-seeing, not just a head-seeing. There is a spiritual seeing and a physical seeing. And what he longs for us to see spiritually is "the hope to which [God] has called" us, "the riches of his glorious inheritance," and "the immeasurable greatness of his power." In other words, what he wants us to see is the spiritual reality and value of these things, not just raw facts that unbelievers can read and repeat. That is not the point of spiritual seeing. Spiritual seeing is seeing spiritual things for

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<sup>19</sup> Additional texts teaching this truth include Luke 10:22, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him." John 6:37, "All that the Father gives me will come to me." John 6:44, "No one can come to me unless the Father who sent me draws him." John 6:65, "No one can come to me unless it is granted him by the Father." Acts 13:48, "As many as were appointed to eternal life believed."

what they really are—that is, seeing them as beautiful and valuable as they really are.

THE MOST GRACIOUS COMMAND AND BEST GIFT  
OF THE GOSPEL

The ultimate good of the gospel is seeing and savoring the beauty and value of God. God's wrath and our sin obstruct that vision and that pleasure. You can't see and savor God as supremely satisfying while you are full of rebellion against him and he is full of wrath against you. The removal of this wrath and this rebellion is what the gospel is for. The ultimate aim of the gospel is the display of God's glory and the removal of every obstacle to our seeing it and savoring it as our highest treasure. "Behold your God!" is the most gracious command and best gift of the gospel. If we do not see him and savor him as our greatest fortune, we have not obeyed or believed the gospel. There is a passage in the Bible that makes this even more clear than any we have seen. To this we now turn.

## THE GOSPEL—THE GLORY OF THE GLADNESS OF GOD

One of the most simple and profound descriptions of the gospel in the New Testament occurs in 1 Timothy 1:11. Paul is describing the right use of the Old Testament law as a means of exposing and restraining sin. He lists twelve particular evils, then adds, “and whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine.” Then he continues with one more qualifying phrase: “. . . *according to the gospel of the glory of the blessed God*” (1 Tim. 1:11, ASV).<sup>1</sup> William Mounce comments that the words “gospel of the glory” should not be translated “glorious gospel,” as most modern versions do. “Rather τῆς δόξης [the glory] is the actual content of that gospel, i.e., ‘the gospel which tells of the glory of God.’”<sup>2</sup>

The gospel reveals the glory of God. The argument of this book is that this revelation is precisely what makes the gospel good news,

<sup>1</sup> Most versions (NIV, NASB, RSV, ESV, KJV) treat the phrase “of the glory” in “gospel of the glory of the blessed God” as an adjective, and translate it like this: “the *glorious* gospel of the blessed God.” But this is not necessary because all these versions translate a similar phrase in 2 Corinthians 4:4 as, “the gospel of the glory of Christ,” not as “the glorious gospel of Christ.” I agree with Henry Alford that the versions should follow the same literal principle in 1 Timothy 1:11 that they followed in 2 Corinthians 4:4. “All propriety and beauty of expression is here [in 1 Timothy 1:11], as always, destroyed by this adjectival rendering. The gospel is ‘the glad tidings of the glory of God,’ as of Christ in 2 Corinthians 4:4, inasmuch as it reveals to us God in all His glory.” Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, vol. 3 (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), 307. Similarly J. N. D. Kelly writes, “The gospel tells of the glory of the blessed God (this translation is preferable to ‘the glorious gospel’ . . .) because, in contrast to the law, which only serves to bring to light the sinfulness of men, it reveals in the person of Christ the divine power, majesty, and compassion.” *A Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1963), 51.

<sup>2</sup> William Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2000), 43.



and that it is not good news if the glory of God is not seen in it. In other words, the glory of God is not marginal or dispensable but is essential to making the good news good.

#### GOD'S HAPPINESS IS A GREAT PART OF HIS GLORY

In 1 Timothy 1:11 Paul focuses on the gospel as “the glory of the *blessed* God.” The word translated “blessed” in this phrase (μακαρίου) is the same one used in the beatitudes of Jesus in Matthew 5:3-11. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth.” And so on. The word means “happy” or “fortunate.” Paul himself uses it in other places to refer to the happiness of the person whose sins are forgiven (Rom. 4:7) or the person whose conscience is clear (Rom. 14:22). It is astonishing that only here and in 1 Timothy 6:15<sup>3</sup> in the entire Old Testament and New Testament does the word refer to God. Paul has clearly done something unusual, calling God *makarios*, happy.<sup>4</sup>

We may learn from the phrase “the glory of the happy God” that a great part of God’s glory is his happiness.<sup>5</sup> It was inconceivable to the apostle Paul that God could be denied infinite joy and still be all-glorious. To be infinitely glorious was to be infinitely happy. He used the phrase, “the glory of the happy God,” because it is a glorious thing for God to be as happy as he is. God’s glory consists much in the fact that he is happy beyond all our imagination.

#### NO GOSPEL WITHOUT A GLAD GOD

Even more remarkably, Paul says that this is part of the gospel—“the *gospel* of the glory of the happy God.” An essential part of what makes the gospel of the death and resurrection of Christ *good* news

<sup>3</sup> 1 Timothy 6:15 says, “He who is the *blessed* [μακάριος] and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords.”

<sup>4</sup> All the places where God is called “blessed” in the rest of the Greek Bible use another word for “blessed”—*eulogetos*, not *makarios*. “Blessed be the Lord” is εὐλογητός. κύριος (Ps. 41:13 = Ps. 40:4 LXX), but “blessed is the man” is μακάριος ἄνθρωπος (Ps. 1:1).

<sup>5</sup> For a more extended treatment of God’s happiness see John Piper, *The Pleasures of God* (Sisters, Ore.: Multnomah, 2000). At this point I am drawing on things I have said there.

is that the God it reveals is infinitely joyful. No one would want to spend eternity with an unhappy God. If God were unhappy, then the goal of the gospel would not be a happy goal, and that means it would be no gospel at all. But in fact Jesus invites us to spend eternity with a supremely joyful God when he says to us—what he will say at the end of the age—“Enter into the joy of your master” (Matt. 25:23). Jesus lived and died that his joy—God’s joy—might be in us and our joy might be full (John 15:11; 17:13). Therefore the gospel is “the gospel of the glory of the happy God.”

#### WHAT’S GOOD ABOUT HAVING A GLAD GOD IN THE GOSPEL?

I must be careful here lest I start writing the book I have already written, *The Pleasures of God: Meditations on God’s Delight in Being God*. But at least one of its ideas needs to be here. One of the grounds of God’s joy is so crucial for grasping what is supremely good about the gospel that I must explain it here.

The happiness of God is first and foremost a happiness in his Son.<sup>6</sup> Thus when we share in the happiness of God, we share in the very pleasure that the Father has in the Son. Ultimately this is what makes the gospel good news. It opens the way for us to see and savor the glory of Christ. And when we reach that ultimate goal we will find ourselves savoring the Son with the very happiness that the Father has in the Son.

This is why Jesus made the Father known to us. At the end of his great prayer in John 17:26 he said to his Father, “I made known to them your name, and I will continue to make it known, that the love with which you have loved me may be in them, and I in them.” The love God has for the Son will be in us. That is, the love for the Son that will be in us will be the Father’s love for the Son. We will not merely love the Son with our paltry ability to love. But our love for the Son will be infused with the divine love between the Father

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<sup>6</sup> See the chapter “The Pleasure of God in His Son” for the fuller defense and explanation of this truth. *Ibid.*, 25-46.

and the Son. Therefore, we should realize from John 17:26 that Jesus made God known so that God's pleasure in his Son might be in us and become our pleasure in Christ.

Imagine being able to enjoy what is infinitely enjoyable with unbounded energy and passion forever. This is not our experience now. Three things stand in the way of our complete satisfaction in this world. One is that nothing here has a personal worth great enough to meet the deepest longings of our hearts. Another is that we lack the strength to savor the best treasures to their maximum worth. And the third obstacle to complete satisfaction is that our joys here come to an end. Nothing lasts.

But if the aim of the gospel—the aim of Jesus in John 17:26 and the aim of Paul in 1 Timothy 1:11 and 2 Corinthians 4:4-6—comes true, all this will change. If God's pleasure in the Son becomes our pleasure, then the object of our pleasure, Jesus, will be inexhaustible in personal worth. He will never become boring or disappointing or frustrating. No greater treasure can be conceived than the very Son of God. Moreover, our ability to savor this inexhaustible treasure will not be limited by human weaknesses. We will enjoy the Son of God with the very enjoyment of his omnipotently happy Father. God's delight in his Son will be in us, and it will be ours. And this will never end, because neither the Father nor the Son ever ends. Their love for each other will be our love for them, and therefore our loving them will never die.

This is the ultimate reason why the gospel is good news. If this does not come true for Christ's people, there is no good news. Therefore, preaching the good news must endeavor to lead people to this. We must make plain to people that if their hope stops short of seeing and savoring the glory of God in Christ, they are not fixing their hearts on the main thing and the best thing Christ died to accomplish—seeing and savoring the glory of God in the face of Christ with everlasting and ever-increasing joy.