

# The Gospel: It's bigger than you think!

*"Here is a gospel of total healing: the healing of creation, the restoration of all things—truly the whole gospel for the whole world. Salvation through Jesus Christ by the Spirit is thus the story of how God is redeeming and transforming his creation." – Howard Snyder*

Does that sound like the gospel message you first heard? Many of us will have received, and probably spoken, a message more like, 'Jesus died for you to provide forgiveness for your sins so you can go to heaven when you die.' What a difference in scope! The latter version may contain truth, but it is not the gospel that Jesus, Paul or the other New Testament apostles preached. This session aims to expand our understanding of – and excitement about – the true Gospel of the Kingdom.



## A limited gospel

Dealing with the problem of sin that separates a person from God so that they can enjoy fellowship with God in this life and in the future is usually central to presentations of the gospel message. However, when the New Testament speaks about the gospel or the good news<sup>1</sup> it only once refers to the 'gospel of salvation' but seven times to the 'gospel of the kingdom' (e.g. Mat 9:35). The kingdom, or kingship, of God is much more a feature of the gospel than personal salvation, or 'sin management' as Christian writer and philosopher Dallas Willard put it.

*"Much ... evangelism today fastens on Jesus as (personal) Saviour and dodges Jesus as Messiah and Lord." – Scot McKnight*

## According to the Scriptures

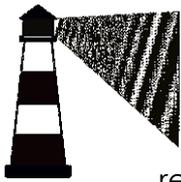


Thinking back to our sessions on the Bible and Hermeneutics, if we want to understand what the gospel is we first need to know how the early Christians and the writers of the New Testament viewed it. They do talk about 'sin' and 'forgiveness' but what was in their minds concerning these? One thing they were adamant about was that it was all 'according to the Scriptures'.

<sup>1</sup> The word 'gospel' comes from the old English 'God-spel' meaning 'good news' or 'good story' and is a translation of the Greek 'evangelion'.

1 Cor 15:1-4 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you... <sup>3</sup>For what I received I passed on to you as of **first importance**: that Christ died for our sins **according to the Scriptures**, <sup>4</sup>that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day **according to the Scriptures**...

In short, they believed Jesus had died and rose again as a *continuation and fulfilment of the story of Israel*. Not just isolated prophecies about



Christ, hidden away in certain Old Testament books, but the whole history of their nation was involved. Originally, Israel was called to be a 'light to the Gentiles', to transmit the blessing of Abraham to all nations, corporately

representing God to the world. But they rebelled, fell into idolatry and eventually were banished from their land. (Ironically, their own history mirrored the story of humanity being banished from the garden of Eden, when they were supposed to be the catalyst that led humanity back there.) Even after a remnant of them returned from exile, they continued under foreign domination and there was a painful sense that their exile was still ongoing. They knew it was all a result of their sin as a nation. Ongoing occupation meant national sin had not been forgiven and meanwhile the world was not being reached.



However, they had promises that a king from David's family would arise and that God himself would come to take away the shame of the nation, restoring their true identity and purpose – to be a blessing to the world and part of a whole 'new creation' in a new age of the Spirit. But in order for this to happen, they needed a new return from exile, a new 'Exodus' from slavery – and this would only be possible through a divine act of 'forgiveness of sins' for the nation. This narrative was part of their ongoing reality, embedded in their corporate psyche.

So, when the angel Gabriel broke a 400 year silence from God with the news that the promised Davidic king was coming, and told Joseph, '*You are to give him the name Jesus, because he will **save his people from their sins***,' this message would have resonated with the national psychological and historical backdrop in a powerful way.

## Discussion time...

Thinking about the wider meaning of 'forgiveness of sins':

1. What expectations might have arisen in Joseph as a result of Gabriel's words to him?
2. Could this allow us to better understand the gospel and how might this affect our presentation of it to our not-yet-Christian friends?

## Part 2: A gospel of global restoration

*"The 'forgiveness of sins' was a huge, life-changing, world-changing reality, long promised and long awaited. It was the fulfilment of Israel's hopes for restoration, coupled with the sense that when Israel was restored, this would somehow generate a new day for the whole human race. It is startling to reflect on just how diminished the average modern Western Christian vision of 'hope', of 'inheritance', or indeed of 'forgiveness' itself has become." – N.T. Wright*

### Continuity, not reset

The announcement of forgiveness of sins for Israel meant restoration of their true identity and mandate. Today we think of personal salvation, forgiveness of our individual sins, the promise of eternal life (all of which is true!), but to them it meant return from 'exile' at last, a new Exodus from slavery, the re-forming of a nation under God. It meant the restoration of their role to rule on God's behalf, bringing blessing to the world. They were to be 'kings' and priests on the earth, as was always intended. In God's new kingdom age, once again a righteous King would rule over them, overcome their enemies, destroy evil and spread God's faithfulness to the ends of the earth. The end result would be a 'new creation'.

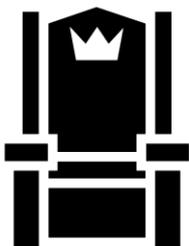


This was 'good news' indeed: much more than just individual, personal cleansing from guilt, rather a message of restoration for the entire world! Israel's renewal would touch every nation, releasing them from their own slavery to sin, even bringing them into the same inheritance.

God's destiny for Israel was not put aside in favour of a 'better plan' involving personal forgiveness. Their story reached its climax in Jesus who got the whole thing back on track by becoming all that Israel was meant to be but failed to achieve and re-launching the Israel project around himself, with the Church (now both Jew and Gentile) fulfilling the original plan to bless the nations and turn them back to God.

### Gospel of the kingdom

The amazing news of the gospel is that, in and through Jesus, God has fully and finally become King of the whole of creation, and that everything is being brought under his loving rule – God's will done on Earth as in Heaven! The rupture between heaven and Earth, caused by idolatry and sin has been fixed.



This means every injustice and evil will be rectified, creation will be restored, the cosmos finally reflecting its creator and

fulfilling its true nature and purpose – and humanity is part of that glorious long-term programme of restoration!

So, personal forgiveness and reconciliation with God are just the entry point, so we can unite with God in his great purpose for the universe. The goal is 'restoration of all things' (Acts 3:21). Personal salvation makes us part of the ongoing global revolution of grace and love in God's kingdom!

### Proclaiming the gospel

Our gospel presentation therefore should not simply be, 'I've had this experience; perhaps you might like it too,' but rather an announcement that a whole new state of affairs, a new creation, a new kingdom, has arrived. It is not simply that 'Jesus died for you personally so that you can be forgiven and go to heaven when you die', but that through Jesus God has launched a whole new thing in this world. One way of telling this story could be:



*There is a true and good King in charge of everything, called Jesus! Through Jesus, God is putting right all that is wrong with this world. He is working to get rid of all injustice and pain by transforming more and more people so that they can become all they were created to be and live lives that spread his goodness and love everywhere!*

*This includes you! By turning to God, you can experience forgiveness and true peace and real friendship with God, becoming part of God's amazing plan to restore the whole world to how it should be!*

*This new life can start right now and will go on forever, because God will eventually give us completely new and healthy bodies to live on a new perfect Earth. Heaven and Earth will be joined together forever, and justice, peace, love, wholeness and life will totally replace the injustice, strife, hatred and death that we see around us today!*

*That process has already started. You can be part of it from today and become all you were meant to be – God's selfie, his image, showing what he is like through your words, actions, and even healing power! This is what you were born for – union with the loving God!*

### Final thoughts

As Romans 1 makes clear, the real 'fall' of humanity was not sin but idolatry – the failure to worship the true God. Sin is a consequence of this, not its cause. Worshiping idols caused humanity to lose its true vocation as the image and delegated rule of God. We handed over our authority, and the 'idols' (or the powers behind them) seized control, plunging the

world into chaos, using the power of sin to enslave humanity. Sin is not just 'doing bad things' but a failure to be who we really are.



But Jesus won back our authority and restored it to us. Forgiveness of sin broke the power of the idols over us so that we can now take up our true identity and purpose – to worship God, to image him in creation and to rule on his behalf. We are the royal priesthood, through whom God is restoring the whole creation to its original glorious destiny!

*"The purpose of forgiving sin... is to enable people to become fully functioning, fully image-bearing human beings within God's world, already now, completely in the age to come." – N.T. Wright*

The gospel of the kingdom is so much more than personal forgiveness and salvation, more than going to heaven. It is a revolutionary, global, earth-shattering (in fact, earth-restoring) piece of news – that God has decisively stepped in, come in person in Jesus, and, through Jesus' death and resurrection, launched an unstoppable, irresistible programme of total restoration and a whole new creation, to be completed when Jesus comes once more, but which we can all be an active part of, even in our everyday lives, as God empowers us by his Spirit and lives within us, no longer any barrier between us and God – true union in heart and mind.

In the next session, we will look at how the cross made all this possible.

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### Book list

If you want to read some more, here are some (fairly substantial) books which are relevant to this session and also to some future ones:

*How God Became King: The Forgotten Story of the Gospels*, N. T. Wright, HarperCollins, 2012

*The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited*, Scot McKnight, Zondervan, 2011 and 2016

*The Day the Revolution Began: Rethinking The Meaning Of Jesus' Crucifixion*, Tom Wright, SPCK, 2016

*Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace: Overcoming the Divorce Between Earth and Heaven*, Howard A. Snyder with Joel Scandrett, Wipf and Stock, 2011

*Breakthrough: Discovering the Kingdom (Kingdom Theology Series)*, Derek Morpew, Derek Morpew Publications, 2011