

GOD
IS THE
GOSPEL

MEDITATIONS ON GOD'S LOVE
AS THE GIFT OF HIMSELF

JOHN PIPER

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God Is the Gospel

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to
Abraham and Molly Piper
who together are making
marriage and music
for love's best Gift.

*From you our life arrives
And into you departs.
Then we begin to live.
You are the life of lives.
You are the heart of hearts.
You are the gift you give.*
acp

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A WORD OF THANKS

First, I say to Jesus Christ, “I thank you that you have answered me and have become my salvation. . . . I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you” (Psalm 118:21; 63:2-3).

Second, I say to Noël and Talitha, thank you for loving me as I disappeared to my study for the long days of writing. Thank you for living the gospel with me.

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Finally, to Jonathan Edwards and John Owen whose vision of the glories of Christ has been for my soul a beam of spiritual light and life, thank you.

*Christ also suffered once for sins,
the righteous for the unrighteous,
that he might bring us to God.*

I P E T E R 3 : 1 8

INTRODUCTION: WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS MOST—THE GOSPEL'S GREATEST GIFT, GOD

Today—as in every generation—it is stunning to watch the shift away from God as the all-satisfying gift of God's love. It is stunning how seldom God himself is proclaimed as the greatest gift of the gospel. But the Bible teaches that the best and final gift of God's love is the enjoyment of God's beauty. "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" (Ps. 27:4). The best and final gift of the gospel is that we gain Christ. "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ" (Phil. 3:8). This is the all-encompassing gift of God's love through the gospel—to see and savor the glory of Christ forever.

In place of this, we have turned the love of God and the gospel of Christ into a divine endorsement of our delight in many lesser things, especially the delight in our being made much of. The acid test of biblical God-centeredness—and faithfulness to the gospel—is this: Do you feel more loved because God makes much of you, or because, at the cost of his Son, he enables you to enjoy making much of him forever? Does your happiness hang on seeing the cross of

Christ as a witness to your worth, or as a way to enjoy God's worth forever? Is God's glory in Christ the foundation of your gladness?

From the first sin in the Garden of Eden to the final judgment of the great white throne, human beings will continue to embrace the love of God as the gift of everything but himself. Indeed there are ten thousand gifts that flow from the love of God. The gospel of Christ proclaims the news that he has purchased by his death ten thousand blessings for his bride. But none of these gifts will lead to final joy if they have not first led to God. And not one gospel blessing will be enjoyed by anyone for whom the gospel's greatest gift was not the Lord himself.

IS DIVINE LOVE THE ENDORSEMENT OF SELF-ADMIRATION?

The sad thing is that a radically man-centered view of love permeates our culture and our churches. From the time they can toddle we teach our children that feeling loved means feeling made much of. We have built whole educational philosophies around this view of love—curricula, parenting skills, motivational strategies, therapeutic models, and selling techniques. Most modern people can scarcely imagine an alternative understanding of feeling loved other than feeling made much of. If you don't make much of me you are not loving me.

But when you apply this definition of love to God, it weakens his worth, undermines his goodness, and steals our final satisfaction. If the enjoyment of God himself is not the final and best gift of love, then God is not the greatest treasure, his self-giving is not the highest mercy, the gospel is not the good news that sinners may enjoy their Maker, Christ did not suffer to bring us to God, and our souls must look beyond him for satisfaction.

This distortion of divine love into an endorsement of self-admiration is subtle. It creeps into our most religious acts. We claim to be praising God because of his love for us. But if his love for us is at bottom his making much of us, who is really being praised? We are willing to be God-centered, it seems, as long as God is man-

centered. We are willing to boast in the cross as long as the cross is a witness to our worth. Who then *is* our pride and joy?¹

GREAT SELF OR GREAT SPLENDOR?

Our fatal error is believing that wanting to be happy means wanting to be made much of. It feels so good to be affirmed. But the good feeling is finally rooted in the worth of self, not the worth of God. This path to happiness is an illusion. And there are clues. There are clues in every human heart even before conversion to Christ. One of those clues is that no one goes to the Grand Canyon or to the Alps to increase his self-esteem. That is not what happens in front of massive deeps and majestic heights. But we do go there, and we go for joy. How can that be, if being made much of is the center of our health and happiness? The answer is that it is not the center. In wonderful moments of illumination there is a witness in our hearts: soul-health and great happiness come not from beholding a great self but a great splendor.

THE HIGHEST, BEST, FINAL, DECISIVE GOOD IN THE GOSPEL

The gospel of Jesus Christ reveals what that splendor is. Paul calls it the “the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God” (2 Cor. 4:4). Two verses later he calls it “the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.”

When I say that *God Is the Gospel* I mean that the highest, best, final, decisive good of the gospel, without which no other gifts would be good, is the glory of God in the face of Christ revealed for our everlasting enjoyment. The saving love of God is God’s commitment to do everything necessary to enthrall us with what is most deeply and durably satisfying, namely himself. Since we are sinners and have no

¹ I will deal with the question of proper joy in God’s gifts, including people, in Chapter Ten. For now consider, for example, that when Paul says in 1 Thessalonians 2:19, “For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at his coming? Is it not you?” the question still remains: What is the ultimate source or ground or bottom or goal of his joy? There is no dispute that people bring us joy. There is no dispute that our own clear conscience is a source of joy (Rom. 14:22). The question is: How does this joy relate to God? Are these things a cause of joy because they show us more of him or lead us toward him? Or is he a joy because he leads us to them?

right and no desire to be enthralled with God, therefore God's love enacted a plan of redemption to provide that right and that desire. The supreme demonstration of God's love was the sending of his Son to die for our sins and to rise again so that sinners might have the right to approach God and might have the pleasure of his presence forever.

In order for the Christian gospel to be good news it must provide an all-satisfying and eternal gift that undeserving sinners can receive and enjoy. For that to be true, the gift must be three things. First, the gift must be purchased by the blood and righteousness of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Our sins must be covered, and the wrath of God against us must be removed, and Christ's righteousness must be imputed to us. Second, the gift must be free and not earned. There would be no good news if we had to merit the gift of the gospel. Third, the gift must be God himself, above all his other gifts.

It would be a misunderstanding of this book if it were seen as minimizing the battles being fought for a biblical understanding of the *ways and means* God has used in the accomplishment and application of redemption.² The fact that this book is focusing on the infinite value of the ultimate goal of the gospel should increase, rather than decrease, our commitment not to compromise the great gospel means God used to get us there.

The gospel is the good news of our final and full enjoyment of the glory of God in the face of Christ. That this enjoyment had to be purchased for sinners at the cost of Christ's life makes his glory shine all the more brightly. And that this enjoyment is a free and unmerited gift makes it shine more brightly still. But the price Jesus paid for the gift and the unmerited freedom of the gift are not the gift. The gift is Christ himself as the glorious image of God—seen and savored with everlasting joy.

² Another way to say this is that *all* of John Murray's classic statement on *Redemption—Accomplished and Applied* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1955), is crucial, not just the concluding section on "glorification." Our views of the necessity, nature, perfection, and extent of the atonement, and our views of effectual calling, regeneration, faith, repentance, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance, and union with Christ are crucial. Nothing I say in this book should be construed to minimize these essential biblical truths. If anything, I hope the preciousness of the goal (seeing and savoring God himself) will make us more vigilant to preserve the truth of the means.

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

The critical question for our generation—and for every generation—is this: If you could have heaven, with no sickness, and with all the friends you ever had on earth, and all the food you ever liked, and all the leisure activities you ever enjoyed, and all the natural beauties you ever saw, all the physical pleasures you ever tasted, and no human conflict or any natural disasters, could you be satisfied with heaven, if Christ were not there?

And the question for Christian leaders is: Do we preach and teach and lead in such a way that people are prepared to hear that question and answer with a resounding *No*? How do we understand the gospel and the love of God? Have we shifted with the world from God's love as the gift of himself to God's love as the gift of a mirror in which we like what we see? Have we presented the gospel in such a way that the gift of the glory of God in the face of Christ is marginal rather than central and ultimate? If so, I pray that this book might be one way God wakens us to see the supreme value and importance of "the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." I pray that our ministries would have the same focal point as the ministry of John Owen, the great Puritan writer of the seventeenth century. Richard Daniels said of him:

There is one motif so important to John Owen, so often and so broadly cited by him, that the writer would go so far as to call it the focal point of Owen's theology . . . namely, the doctrine that in the gospel we behold, by the Christ-given Holy Spirit, the glory of God "in the face of Christ" and are thereby changed into his image.³

ARE WE PREPARING PEOPLE FOR HEAVEN?

Can we really say that our people are being prepared for heaven where Christ himself, not his gifts, will be the supreme pleasure? And if our people are unfit for that, will they even go there? Is not

³ Richard Daniels, *The Christology of John Owen* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Reformation Heritage Books, 2004), 92.

the faith that takes us to heaven the foretaste of the feast of Christ? J. C. Ryle once preached a sermon called “Christ Is All” based on Colossians 3:11. In it he said:

But alas, how little fit for heaven are many who talk of ‘going to heaven’ when they die, while they manifestly have no saving faith, and no real acquaintance with Christ. You give Christ no honor here. You have no communion with Him. You do not love Him. Alas! what could you do in heaven? It would be no place for you. Its joys would be no joys for you. Its happiness would be a happiness into which you could not enter. Its employments would be a weariness and burden to your heart. Oh, repent and change before it be too late!⁴

Nothing fits a person to be more useful on earth than to be more ready for heaven. This is true because readiness for heaven means taking pleasure in beholding the Lord Jesus, and beholding the glory of the Lord means being changed into his likeness (2 Cor. 3:18). Nothing would bless this world more than more people who are more like Christ. For in likeness to Christ the world might see Christ.

WHAT THE WORLD NEEDS MOST

When we celebrate the gospel of Christ and the love of God, and when we lift up the gift of salvation, let us do it in such a way that people will see through it to God himself. May those who hear the gospel from our lips know that salvation is the blood-bought gift of seeing and savoring the glory of Christ. May they believe and say, “Christ is all!” Or, to use the words of the psalmist, “May those who love your salvation say evermore, ‘God is great!’” (Ps. 70:4). Not mainly, “Salvation is great,” but “God is great!”

May the church of Jesus Christ say with increasing intensity, “The LORD is my chosen portion and my cup” (Ps. 16:5). “As a deer pants for flowing streams, so pants my soul for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God” (Ps. 42:1). “We would

⁴ J. C. Ryle in a sermon titled “Christ is All,” from Colossians 3:11. *Holiness: Its Nature, Hindrances, Difficulties, and Roots* (1877; reprint, Moscow, Ida.: Charles Nolan Publishers, 2001), 384.

rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord” (2 Cor. 5:8). “My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better” (Phil. 1:23).

The world needs nothing more than to see the worth of Christ in the work and words of his God-besotted people. This will come to pass when the church awakens to the truth that the saving love of God is the gift of himself, and that God himself is the gospel.

Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news 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.

L U K E 2 : 1 0 - 1 1

Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel. . . . For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: 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.

1 C O R I N T H I A N S 1 5 : 1 - 4

THE GOSPEL—
PROCLAMATION AND
EXPLANATION

I pray that one of the effects of this book will be that the gospel of Jesus Christ is heralded—proclaimed, announced, declared, broadcast—in all its magnificent fullness for all the world to hear. That is what a person does who has heard good news. He tells it. And *gospel* means good news. Good news is for proclaiming—for heralding the way an old-fashioned town crier would do.

Hear ye! Hear ye! Hear ye! All rebels, insurgents, dissidents, and protesters against the King! Hear the royal decree! A great day of reckoning is coming, a day of justice and vengeance. But now hear this, all inhabitants of the King's realm! Amnesty is herewith published by the mercy of your Sovereign. A price has been paid. All debts may be forgiven. All rebellion absolved. All dishonor pardoned. None is excluded from this offer. Lay down the weapons of rebellion, kneel in submission, receive the royal amnesty as a gift of imperial love, swear fealty to your sovereign, and rise a free and happy subject of your King.

NEWS! NEWS! NEWS!

The word for gospel in the New Testament is *euangelion* (εὐαγγέλιον). It's built out of a prefix that means good or joyful and a root word that means message or news. The word was used

widely in the New Testament world to mean “the message of victory, but also used of political and private messages bringing joy.”¹ In a period of history without print media or radio or television, the messenger with the good news delivered the news in person. It was spoken as an announcement. It had a celebrative feel to it. The messenger exulted over the news he had to bring. It was *good* news.

It is easy in our day to lose the sense of wonder and amazement at the news quality of the gospel. If we would feel what the good news of the New Testament really was, we should not forget the way it was announced in Luke 2:10-11: “The angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you *good news* 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.’”

When this news landed on the earth, the effect was extraordinary—because the news was extraordinary. Nothing like this had ever happened before. Nothing like it has ever happened since. Something absolutely new had entered history. One could even say, a whole new history began with the coming of Jesus.

WHY ARE THE PRISONERS REJOICING? NEWS!

Consider another picture of the gospel arriving. This time not the ancient town crier, but a modern prison camp. Imagine American prisoners of war held behind barbed wire in a camp with little food and filthy conditions near the end of the Second World War.² On the outside of the fence the captors are free and go about their business as though they don’t have a care. Inside the fence the captured soldiers are thin, hollow-eyed, unshaven, and dirty. Some die each day.

Then somehow a shortwave radio is smuggled into one of the barracks. There is connection with the outside world and the progress of the war. Then one day the captors on the outside of the

¹ Ulrich Becker, “Gospel, Evangelize, Evangelist,” in *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, 3 vols., ed. Colin Brown (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1986), 2:107.

² I first heard this analogy from Ray Bakke told in relation to ministry in the urban centers of our country. I have adapted it for use here.

fence see something very strange. Inside the fence the weak, dirty, unshaved American soldiers are smiling and laughing, and a few who have the strength give a whoop and throw tin pans into the air.

What makes this so strange to everyone outside the fence is that nothing has changed. These American soldiers are still in captivity. They still have little food and water. And many are still sick and dying. But what the captors don't know is that what these soldiers do have is news. The enemy lines have been broken through. The decisive battle of liberation has been fought. And the liberating troops are only miles away from the camp. Freedom is imminent.

This is the difference that news makes. Christians have heard the news that Christ has come into the world and has fought the decisive battle to defeat Satan and death and sin and hell. The war will be over soon, and there is no longer any doubt as to who will win. Christ will win, and he will liberate all those who have put their hope in him.

The good news is not that there is no pain or death or sin or hell. There is. The good news is that the King himself has come, and these enemies have been defeated, and if we trust in what he has done and what he promises, we will escape the death sentence and see the glory of our Liberator and live with him forever. This news fills us with hope and joy (Rom. 15:13) and frees us from self-pity and empowers us to love those who are suffering. In this hope-sustained love he will help us persevere until the final trumpet of liberation sounds and the prison camp is made into a "new earth" (2 Pet. 3:13).

BUT WHAT DOES THE NEWS MEAN?

But the gospel is not only news. It is first news, and then it is doctrine. *Doctrine* means teaching, explaining, clarifying. Doctrine is part of the gospel because news can't be just declared by the mouth of a herald—it has to be understood in the mind of a hearer. If the town crier says, "Amnesty is herewith published by the mercy of your Sovereign," someone will ask, "What does 'amnesty' mean?"

There will be many questions when the news is announced. “What is the price that has been paid?” “How have we dishonored the King?” When the gospel is proclaimed, it must be explained. What if the shortwave radio announcer used technical terminology that some of the prisoners were not sure of? Someone would need to explain it. Unintelligible good news is not even news, let alone good.

Gospel doctrine matters because the good news is so full and rich and wonderful that it must be opened like a treasure chest, and all its treasures brought out for the enjoyment of the world. Doctrine is the description of these treasures. Doctrine describes their true value and why they are so valuable. Doctrine guards the diamonds of the gospel from being discarded as mere crystals. Doctrine protects the treasures of the gospel from the pirates who don't like the diamonds but who make their living trading them for other stones. Doctrine polishes the old gems buried at the bottom of the chest. It puts the jewels of gospel truth in order on the scarlet tapestry of history so each is seen in its most beautiful place.

And all the while, doctrine does this with its head bowed in wonder that it should be allowed to touch the things of God. It whispers praise and thanks as it deals with the diamonds of the King. Its fingers tremble at the cost of what it handles. Prayers ascend for help, lest any stone be minimized or misplaced. And on its knees gospel doctrine knows it serves the herald. The gospel is not mainly about being explained. Explanation is necessary, but it is not primary. A love letter must be intelligible, but grammar and logic are not the point. Love is the point. The gospel is good news. Doctrine serves that. It serves the one whose feet are bruised (and beautiful!) from walking to the unreached places with news: “Come, listen to the news of God! Listen to what God has done! Listen! Understand! Bow! Believe!”

DEFINING THE GOOD NEWS

What then is the news? What is the message that must be proclaimed and explained? To that we turn in the next chapters. But keep in

mind the angle of this book. Our question is not merely, what is the gospel? Our question is: What is the ultimate good of the gospel that makes all the aspects of good news good? What is the goal of the gospel that, if we miss it, takes all the good out of the gospel? What do we mean when we say God is the gospel?

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 of the grace of God.

A C T S 2 0 : 2 4

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 Testament¹ 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

¹ 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).² 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

² 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.³

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,⁴ and Paul made clear that this was an essential part of the gospel: “Remember Jesus Christ, *risen from the dead*, the offspring of David,

³ 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.”

⁴ 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).⁵ 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

⁵ 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.”⁶ 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-

⁶ 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.

*Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of
good news; lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good news; lift it up, fear not;
say to the cities of Judah, "Behold your God!"*

ISAIAH 40:9