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—Alan Andrews, president, U.S. Navigators

“With his characteristic clarity, compassion, and humility, Jerry Bridges brings the blessings of heaven to the realities of earth—and to the soft places of the heart where those blessings are most needed and most strengthening.”

—Dr. Bryan Chapell, president, Covenant Theological Seminary

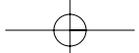
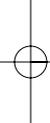
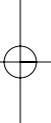
“In language that is clear and concise, *The Gospel for Real Life* unfolds the whole gospel in a way that not only informs the mind, but also encourages the soul to praise God. The body of Christ is indebted to Jerry Bridges for a much needed presentation of the plan of redemption.”

—Robert M. Norris, pastor, Fourth Presbyterian Church, Bethesda, Maryland

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—Sinclair B. Ferguson, minister of St. George’s-Tron Church,  
Glasgow, Scotland

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ISBN 1-57683-507-3

Cover design by Ray Moore

Cover photo from Panoramic Images

Creative Team: Don Simpson, Jacqueline Eaton Blakley, Darla Hightower, Pat Miller

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Bridges, Jerry.

The Gospel for real life with study guide / Jerry Bridges.-- New pbk.

ed.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 1-57683-507-3

1. Christian life. I. Title.

BV4501.3.B75 2003

248.4--dc22

2003014813

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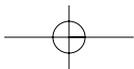
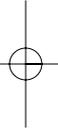
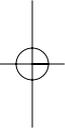
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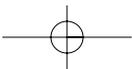
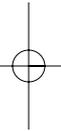
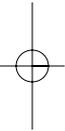


To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father—to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen.

—REVELATION 1:5-6

To Him who loves me and has freed me from my sins, this book is reverently, lovingly, and gratefully dedicated.

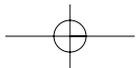
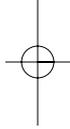
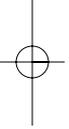




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## PREFACE

Some years ago I heard someone say that we should “preach the gospel to ourselves every day.” Though I had already been doing that to some degree, the statement brought clarity and focus to my own practice, so I began using it in my ministry to others.

So preaching the gospel to yourself every day is what this book is about. It is intended to answer three questions:

- What is the gospel we should preach to ourselves?
- Why do we, *who are already believers*, need to preach it to ourselves?
- How do we do it?

This book is not meant to be a theological treatise. To borrow an expression from the collegiate world, it is intended to be “Gospel 101.” This does not mean it is targeted only to new believers. All of us, regardless of how long we have known Christ, need to bathe ourselves in the gospel every day. I pray this book will help us do that.

One of the joys of writing a preface is the opportunity to express appreciation to those who have helped me in my task. Foremost is Mrs. Tracie Bremner, who graciously volunteered to

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type the manuscript. (Even a computer does not make me a good typist.) Thank you, Tracie. Thanks also to Dr. Dan Doriani, Jim and Beth Luebe, Mark McElmurry, and my pastor, Joseph Wheat, for reading the manuscript and offering helpful comments and suggestions. Thanks to my wife, Jane, for her patient endurance and for reading the manuscript to ensure that it is indeed “Gospel 101” and not a theological treatise. My good friend and editor, Don Simpson, has been a constant help and encouragement. Thank you, Don.

The prayer support of others is a necessity in a project such as this, and I have felt that need more keenly with this book than any other. Although a number of friends have prayed for me, I want to especially thank C. J. Mahaney and the staff at Covenant Life Church for your prayers and continual encouragement. You’ve waited a long time for this book, and you nudged me along when the going was tough. Thanks also to all the rest of you who prayed. I trust God has answered your prayers.

## C H A P T E R O N E

## UNSEARCHABLE RICHES

My friend had just learned that the artificial hip he had received eleven years earlier needed to be replaced. The previous month, he had had angioplasty to open a clogged artery to his heart. Along with all this, he suffers from rheumatoid arthritis. Signs of old age? Not at all. My friend is only fifty-six years old.

A few years ago psychiatrist Scott Peck began one of his books with a three-word sentence: “Life is difficult.”<sup>1</sup> He was right. We live in a sin-cursed world ravaged not only by the forces of nature and disease, but even more so by people’s sinful actions toward one another. No one is exempt. If you’re not experiencing some form of heartache or difficulty at this time, cheer up—it will surely come sooner or later! Even as I have been trying to write this chapter, I’ve been going through a series of nettlesome and discouraging setbacks. And I’ve gotten down on myself because “Christians aren’t supposed to get discouraged.”

Sometimes it seems that circumstances are even worse for Christians. In addition to all the frustrations and heartaches of life common to everyone, we have an enemy—the Devil—who “prowls around like a roaring lion looking for someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8). Even in our success we feel tension. A

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ministry colleague recently confessed that he felt overwhelmed and anxious even in the midst of a fruitful ministry.

Underlying all the other problems we face, however, is the greatest problem of all—our sin. Not the sins of other people against us, as painful as those may be, but our own sin against God. Sin brings with it a sense of guilt, condemnation, and alienation from God. As one dear Christian woman expressed it, “I know God loves me, but sometimes I wonder if He likes me.”

What was she saying? How can God love her and not like her? She was saying, “I know God loves me and sent His Son to die for me, but because of my repeated sins and shortcomings, I feel His displeasure toward me.” And yet this woman has spent her adult life in full-time Christian ministry and is an outstanding committed Christian. She is not alone in her feelings. Church historian Richard Lovelace has written that many Christians “below the surface of their lives are guilt-ridden and insecure . . . [and] draw the assurance of their acceptance with God from their sincerity, their past experience of conversion, their recent religious performance or the relative infrequency of their conscious, willful disobedience.”<sup>2</sup>

Why is this true? Why do so many believers, including those deeply serious about their Christian commitment, live lives of quiet desperation? One answer is that we have a truncated view of the gospel, tending to see it only as a door we walk through to become a Christian. In this view, the gospel is only for unbelievers. Once you become a Christian, you don’t need it anymore except to share with people who are still outside the door. What you need to hear instead are the challenges and how-tos of discipleship.

Another reason for our quiet desperation is that many people have a utilitarian view of the gospel. *What can the gospel*

## UNSEARCHABLE RICHES

*do for me?* Some want only the proverbial “fire insurance”—they want the good life now and the good life hereafter. Others are looking for a solution to their problems or a way to a more successful life. This view is aptly illustrated in a breezy church flyer that advertised:

At Valley Church, you

- meet new friends and neighbors
- hear positive, practical messages that uplift you each week on:
  - How to feel good about yourself
  - How to overcome depression
  - How to have a full and successful life
  - Learning to handle your money without it handling you
  - The secrets of successful family living
  - How to overcome stress<sup>3</sup>

This utilitarian view of the gospel is not an isolated instance. A flyer with similar wording was put in my own front door recently.

So, between the challenges of discipleship on one hand and the utilitarian view of the gospel on the other, we fail to see the gospel as the solution to our greatest problem—our guilt, condemnation, and alienation from God. Beyond that, we fail to see it as the basis of our day-to-day acceptance with Him. As a result, many believers live in spiritual poverty.

Some years ago our pastor told an unusual story about a Southern plantation owner who left a \$50,000 inheritance to a former slave who had served him faithfully all his life. That was quite a sum of money in those days—perhaps equivalent to half a million dollars today. The lawyer for the estate duly notified the

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old man of his inheritance and told him that the money had been deposited for him at the local bank. Weeks went by, and the former slave never called for any of his inheritance. Finally, the banker called him in and told him again that he had \$50,000 available to draw on at any time. The old man replied, “Sir, do you think I can have fifty cents to buy a sack of cornmeal?” Not having handled money most of his life, this former slave had no comprehension of his wealth. As a result, he was asking for fifty cents when he could easily have had much, much more.

That story illustrates the plight of many Christians today. The apostle Paul wrote of preaching “to the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ” (Ephesians 3:8). Paul was not referring to financial wealth but to the glorious truths of the gospel. To use the figures from the former slave’s story, Paul was saying that each of us has \$50,000 available to us in the gospel. Yet most of us are hoping we can squeeze out fifty cents’ worth. Why is this true? The answer is that we don’t understand the riches of the gospel any more than the former slave understood the riches of \$50,000.

I grew up in an era and a section of the United States where the realities of heaven and hell were regularly preached. There was no doubt in my mind that there was a hell to shun and a heaven to gain. When finally as a teenager I did trust Christ, my sole objective was just that—to escape hell and go to heaven when I died. Now that, in itself, is of inestimable value, and I wouldn’t for a moment minimize the infinite contrast between eternity in heaven and in hell. But that is only part of the gospel. It does not address our relationship with God today.

In our present age, the issue of heaven and hell is irrelevant to most people. Among university students, for example, the open nerve is relationships. The student has had a rotten relationship with his dad and now doesn’t get along too well with

## UNSEARCHABLE RICHES

his roommate. Middle-class working people are concerned about the issues addressed in the church flyer mentioned earlier. The issue of relationships is certainly important, and even some of the subjects on the church flyer are worthy of our attention. But these topics do not begin to explore the “unsearchable riches” Paul was writing about. Paul would probably look at us today and say that we’re asking for fifty cents or perhaps a couple of dollars when we have \$50,000 in the bank. And he would say that this is because we really don’t understand the gospel.

The reality of present-day Christendom is that most professing Christians actually *know* very little of the gospel, let alone understand its implications for their day-to-day lives. My perception is that most of them know just enough gospel to get inside the door of the kingdom. They know nothing of the unsearchable riches of Christ.

So what do we do and where do we begin to grasp a workable understanding of the gospel? That’s what this book is intended to address. The word *gospel* means, essentially, “good news.” And it is specifically good news about our relationship with God. We all like to receive good news, especially if it addresses some bad news we’ve just received. If you’ve just been told that you have cancer, for example, it’s good news when the doctor tells you that it is a type that readily responds to treatment.

The gospel is like that. It is the good news that directly addresses the ultimate bad news of our lives. The Bible tells us that we were in deep trouble with God, that we were unrighteous and ungodly. And then it tells us that God’s wrath is revealed from heaven “against all the godlessness and wickedness of men.” In fact, it tells us that we were by nature objects of God’s wrath (see Romans 1:18; 3:10-12; Ephesians 2:3).

Think of that! When you came into the world as a baby,

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before you had ever done anything bad, you were an object of God's wrath. We'll find out later why that is true. But for now, that is the bad news.

We are familiar with the well-worn good news/bad news jokes. The bad news comes last, and it's always worse than the good news. But the Bible reverses this sequence. It tells us the bad news that we are in trouble with God, and then it tells us the good news that God has provided a solution that far surpasses our problem. Three times in his letters the apostle Paul paints a grim picture of bad news about us, and then each time he says "*but*." In effect, he is saying, "Here is the bad news, but here is the Good News as well." And in Paul's message, the Good News always outweighs the bad news.

Take just one of these instances, in Ephesians 2:1-9. After telling us that we were, by nature, objects of wrath, Paul says, *but* now "God, who is rich in mercy," has actually "raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms." That is surely a dust-to-glory story. What could be a greater contrast than an object of God's wrath seated with His Son in a position of glory?

This good news doesn't begin when we die. It certainly does address that issue, but it also tells us that there is good news for us now. We don't have to feel guilt-ridden and insecure in our relationship with God. We don't have to wonder if He likes us. We can begin each day with the deeply encouraging realization that *I am accepted by God, not on the basis of my personal performance, but on the basis of the infinitely perfect righteousness of Jesus Christ*. We will seek to uncover the depth of meaning in that statement as we work through the coming chapters.

Think again of the story of the former slave. Suppose at the time of coming into his inheritance that he was not only poverty-stricken but also deep in debt for back rent. With his

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inheritance, he could not only pay off his debt but he could also buy the house. His inheritance far surpasses his debt.

This is the truth of the gospel. We owe an enormous spiritual debt to God—a debt we can't begin to pay. There is no way we can make it good. The gospel tells us that Jesus Christ paid our debt, but it also tells us far more. It tells us that we are no longer enemies and objects of His wrath. We are now His sons and daughters, heirs with Jesus Christ of all His unsearchable riches. This is the good news of the gospel.

Why did the apostle Paul develop at such length the bad news of our situation? We can't begin to appreciate the good news of the gospel until we see our deep need. Most people, even people who have already become believers, have never given much thought to how desperate our condition is outside of Christ. Few people ever think about the dreadful implications of being under the wrath of God. And most of all, none of us even begins to realize how truly sinful we are.

Jesus once told a story about a king's servant who owed his master ten thousand talents (see Matthew 18:21-35). One talent was equal to about twenty years' wages for a working man. Ten thousand talents then would have been around two hundred thousand years' wages—an amount so huge it would have been impossible to pay.

Why would Jesus use such an unrealistically large amount when He knew that in real life it would have been impossible for a king's servant to accumulate such a debt? Jesus was fond of using hyperbole to make His point. In the context of the story, that immense sum represents a spiritual debt that every one of us owes to God. It is the debt of our sins. And, for each of us, it is a staggering amount. There is no way we can pay it.

This is what the gospel is all about. Jesus paid our debt to the full. But He did far more than relieve us of debt. He also

## THE GOSPEL FOR REAL LIFE

purchased for us an eternal inheritance worth infinitely more than the \$50,000 the ex-slave inherited. That's why Paul wrote of the "unsearchable riches of Christ." And God wants us to enjoy those unsearchable riches in the here and now, even in the midst of difficult and discouraging circumstances.

The purpose of this book is to explore those unsearchable riches. To appreciate them, however, we need to look briefly at our sinful condition. Though we live in a time when people don't like to talk about sin, only those who understand to some degree the enormity of their spiritual debt can begin to appreciate what Christ did for them at the cross. Without some heartfelt conviction of our sin, we can have no serious feeling of personal interest in the gospel. What's more, this conviction should actually grow throughout our Christian lives. In fact, one sign of spiritual growth is an increased awareness of our sinfulness.

One of the older writers on the subject of the gospel wrote,

"The best preparation for the study of this doctrine [that is, of the truth of the gospel] is—neither great intellectual ability nor much scholastic learning—but a conscience impressed with a sense of our actual condition as sinners in the sight of God."<sup>4</sup>

In the next chapter we will look at our sinful condition so as to better prepare us to explore those unsearchable riches we have in Christ.