

eciple:

# Gospel

*Encountering and remembering the good news of Jesus*

VIDEO ENHANCED EDITION



*Matt Eachus*

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*Encountering and Remembering the Good News of Jesus*

Matt Eachus



[eciple.com](http://eciple.com)

## eciple: Gospel

Founder and president: Bobby Person

Cofounder and executive editor: Matt Eachus

Videography and production: Rob Tompkins

Cover design: Jeremy Woody

Content/copy edit: Jennifer Lonas, Refiner's Touch Editorial Services

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Video shot on location at CentrePoint Ministries, 10 Warren St., Glens Falls, NY 12801

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**eciple™**

E-mail: [info@eciple.com](mailto:info@eciple.com)

Web-site: [www.eciple.com](http://www.eciple.com)

Blog: [knoweciple.com](http://knoweciple.com)

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## Series Preface

The eciple series of e-books is designed to be a concise, focused, and simple tool in the hands of Christians and curious and skeptical non-Christians alike. Our desire is that through these works, you would be introduced to the Faith, strengthened in your walk with Christ, and encouraged to be a more committed servant of Jesus. You won't find academic, technical, or high-sounding language in these books. Plenty of those options are available from other publishers and authors. Instead, you'll find refreshing, easy-to-read, plain-language conversations about Jesus, his Church, the Bible, and what it means to live the Christian life. Our prayer is that through these accessible and simple works, the majesty, wisdom, and beautiful complexity of God would be seen in a way that stirs and strengthens faith in the hearts of our readers. Thank you for choosing this eciple work as part of your faith journey. We trust that it will be a worthy companion.

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## Introduction

# Gospel Encounters

Gospel encounters happen all the time. And they happen in a lot of different ways. Like snowflakes or DNA, no two people have identical stories, and yet in many ways, they're all the same, aren't they?

I was a confused and scared sixteen-year-old kid when I had my gospel encounter. Like so many people I've met over the years, I grew up in a "Christian" home with parents who had come to faith in Christ. I'd been in good churches my whole life — churches where people loved me, taught me what the Bible said, and challenged me to live my life for God and walk by faith. I'm so thankful for that great heritage. Because of that privilege, I don't ever remember a time in my life when I didn't know that God loved me and sent his only Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for my sins. But even though I knew those things, I had never received in a personal way the gift God offered me. Not until one amazing night in Bernville, Pennsylvania.

It was August of 1994 (I'm dating myself, I know), and I was attending a Christian camp with my church youth group. As a teenager I was wrestling with so many questions: Who was I? What was my life really about? What did I really believe? Would my parents' faith be my faith? Big questions. There were some more typical teenage questions, too — about girls in general, and one or two in particular about friends and family.

Perhaps you remember the angst of being a teenager. Everything felt so uncertain and unsettled. I was just trying to find some answers to life. And there in southeast Pennsylvania, in a little chapel on the back side of a pig farm, I heard a message I had heard a thousand times before. But that night something was different. The message was closer to home this time. More personal. It was as if God was talking to me. And I was finally listening.

That night God told me about his love for me: that even though I was a sinner who didn't measure up to his standard of perfection, and even though my heart stubbornly rebelled against him, he loved me anyway. He loved me not because of what I had done or failed to do but because I was his creation, made in his image. And what he wanted was for me to become all he created me to be. To show me his love, he sent Jesus, his



only Son, to die for my sins and shortcomings and give me eternal life instead of the punishment I deserved for breaking his laws.

After listening to the gospel message, I walked out of that little chapel into the hot, humid Pennsylvania night, sat down in the dark under a little tree, breathed deeply, filling my lungs with that pig farm air, and responded. I cried my heart out to God, told him that I agreed with him: I was a sinner who had missed his standard of perfection, I was rebellious and stubborn, and I was in desperate need. I knew that no matter how hard I tried, I'd never be able to fix these problems on my own. I thanked Jesus for dying on the cross for me and asked him to save me from my sins and from the penalty that was coming my way. At that moment, as I lay facedown in the grass under my tree, God rescued me from my sin and gave me a new life. It was a good night indeed.

That's my story. That's how I encountered the gospel – the good news about Jesus. But it's not the only way those encounters work. Everyone's story is different. Some people hear their pastors proclaim the gospel from the pulpit at church, or in some other church setting, and they respond to an invitation to come forward during the service. Some hear the gospel from their parents over the course of their childhoods and respond in faith. Some read the gospel story in the pages of the Bible and are drawn to Jesus.

I have friends who have come to faith in Christ through tragic and desperate circumstances – in prisons, homeless shelters, hospital rooms, and the list goes on. The light of the gospel shone on them in the midst of some very dark situations. Still others have heard the good news from friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers, roommates, teammates, or a stranger on a street corner.

While the gospel comes to each of us differently, the message is the same: We're all sinners separated from a holy God. Because of our sin, we're under a death sentence, and we can't fix the problem by simply trying to be good. But out of his great love for us, God sent his Son, Jesus, to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus died on the cross to reconcile us to God, and he was raised from the dead to give us new life in him. If we accept Jesus by faith, God forgives our sins and promises us eternal life. That's good news! And that's the message of the gospel.

*Jesus died on the cross to reconcile us to God,  
and he was raised from the dead to give us new life in him. . . .  
That's good news!*



Have you had a gospel encounter? (Maybe you just did!) Did it lead you to place your faith in Jesus Christ or at least begin a journey toward faith? Whether your encounter with the gospel is fresh in your mind or tucked away in some dusty corner of your memory, it's your story, and it's unique.

The truth is, I could write a book about all the unique gospel encounters I've heard of over the years (maybe I will someday). But the purpose of this e-book is to give you a basic working knowledge of the gospel message and a deeper understanding of what God has done for you in Christ. For those of you who already have a firm grasp of the gospel, I hope this fresh encounter will breathe new life into your walk with Christ.

You may be wondering why we need another book about the gospel when there's plenty of good literature on the topic already. After all, what more is there to say? As King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 1:9, "There's nothing new under the sun," so why go back over old ground? Good questions, and if you'll hang with me a bit longer, I'll explain.

You see, my gospel encounter began under a little tree at camp on a hot summer night in 1994, but it didn't end there. Gospel stories never do. That encounter was only the beginning. But what was coming for me was more than I had bargained for. I went home to my church and shared with everyone what Jesus had done in my heart and how I had responded to the gospel. Then I got back to living my sixteen-year-old life. I didn't spend much time thinking about God. I didn't invest much energy learning about him, reading the Bible, or growing in my faith. That was too much work, and in my mind there didn't seem to be much of a point. After all, I was already "in the family," so what more was there to being a Christian?

At the time, I fell into a common trap I've seen others fall into many times since: I began to think of my gospel encounter as a kind of ceremonial rite of passage, like a high school graduation. I had walked across the stage (or down the aisle), had received my diploma (or the saving grace of Jesus), and was now on my way to live my life without looking back.

What happened next wasn't unpredictable. The truth is, not much happened at all. I stumbled my way through those early days of my newfound faith. Spiritual growth came slowly, if it came at all. Spiritual disciplines, such as praying and reading my Bible, were tough to establish. I tried hard but couldn't do them consistently. And sharing my faith with friends and family members was too intimidating, not to mention that I really didn't understand much of it myself yet. Loving people as Christ loved them and walking in the power of God's Spirit weren't coming easy either.

I attended church and really liked the people, but my faith was, as it is for so many Christians, a recreational faith—a sort of hobby I dabbled in. Saying it that way is a bit discouraging, even today, but that’s what it became. Beyond that, though, something bigger was occurring that I wouldn’t spot until a few years later: I had gladly trusted Jesus to save me from my sins, but I wasn’t developing the kind of love for him that the Bible described. My relationship with God was stagnant, and that made spiritual disciplines like praying, reading my Bible, and attending church a bit more of a chore than they really ought to have been. I realize now that my stagnant relationship with God was more about me than him. I was going through the motions, doing all the right things, but somehow I had lost connection with Jesus and that gospel encounter I’d had with him at camp.

I had trusted Jesus to save me and had committed my life to him, but my faith wasn’t the joy-filled, growing relationship with God that I’d heard others talk about. I wondered if there was something wrong with me. Maybe I hadn’t done “it” right. Maybe my prayer of faith didn’t take. I wondered whether this life of spiritual stagnancy would continue. Thankfully, it didn’t. And for that I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the visionary son of a bootlegger in Lynchburg, Virginia.

## Gospel Reminders

Through some painful and divinely influenced experiences—like outright disobeying God’s prompting, suffering through a bout with mononucleosis, and nearly failing out of Penn State University—I ended up at Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University in the fall of 1997, ready to pursue God while getting my education. (If you haven’t guessed it yet, Dr. Falwell was the son of that bootlegger in Lynchburg.)

A wonderful thing happened during that time: En route to my bachelor’s degree, I found that deep, rich love for Jesus I’d been looking for. To this day I believe that’s the main reason God led me to LU (that, and meeting my wonderful wife). But that love for Jesus didn’t come because of a class I took or a book I read. The remedy for me was so much bigger yet simpler than all of that. God used my time at Liberty—the professors who guided me, the vision of Dr. Falwell and his larger-than-life dreams about what God would do with people who surrendered to him, and the godly, young men who had become my friends—to *remind* me of the things about my faith that were primary. They were the things of “first importance” that the apostle Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 15:1-4:

I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you

received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you – unless you believed in vain. *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, [and] that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.* (Emphasis added)

Through these “gospel reminders,” a profound change took place in my heart. I understood and appreciated in new ways what Jesus had accomplished for me, and this fresh understanding stirred my heart to love and worship him. I saw myself for who I really was – not a pretty good guy whom God was blessed to have on his team, but an absolute wreck apart from his free gift of grace. Reading and studying my Bible became a joy rather than a chore, and I was growing in my knowledge of the Scriptures. But it wasn’t some “new” information that brought about this transformation. What made all the difference was continually returning to those things of “first importance,” alongside other gospel pilgrims who were also growing in their faith and developing that same love for God.

I’ve found that a lot of good people in churches today are locked in that same cycle of “mechanical” religious devotion I fell into, if you can even call it that. I know my story isn’t an isolated one. Many of my friends and, I suspect, many of you have been exactly where I was: in need of gospel reminders. Maybe that’s why you’re reading this book, hoping it might ignite a spark that will get you moving in the right direction, back toward a vibrant relationship with the Jesus you first encountered in the gospel. If so, this e-book is for you.

Even if you haven’t had a gospel encounter, this e-book is for you, too. The gospel is for all of us, rookies and veterans alike!

As we turn our attention to those things of “first importance” that the apostle Paul talked about and encounter the beautiful gospel of Jesus, my prayer is that you would develop a deep sense of gratitude for the work God’s Son accomplished for you, and that the good news would ignite – or reignite – faith in your heart. Don’t stop reading now. This encounter with the gospel just might change everything!

## Chapter 1

# What Exactly Is the Good News?

As I mentioned earlier, I'm a church kid, born and raised. I've been in and around the church my entire life. I've participated in all the Sunday-school classes and church youth groups and missions trips. Maybe you have, too. My church friends (the "churchies") and I were part of a fun little fraternity growing up. In between the Goldfish crackers, the puppet shows, and the silly songs, we were soaking up some really important elements of the faith. We learned early on that the answer to every Sunday-school teacher's question was Jesus, the Bible, or God. And as the years passed, we inherently knew that the word *gospel* meant "the good news." We picked up on these core pieces of our faith very quickly. With passion and enthusiasm, every little evangelist who grows up in the church is equipped with this very basic definition: The gospel is the good news. Period.

The Greek word for "gospel" is *euangelion*, which means "good news" or "good message." But what exactly does the "good news" mean? Why is it good news? For whom is it good? And what makes it good? Excellent questions! Let's see if we can find some answers.

## Good News or Bad News?

In the fall of 2009, the New York Yankees played in their 321st World Series against the Philadelphia Phillies. (That's a slight exaggeration, but the pain and frustration over the outcome of that matchup have clouded my memory.) Hideki Matsui, New York's power-hitting outfielder, had a night for the ages, going three for four and driving in six of the Yankees' seven runs. Thanks to Matsui, the Bombers closed out the Fall Classic without breaking a sweat. When the dust settled that evening, the Yankees had defeated the Phillies 7-3 and hoisted the World Series trophy for the twenty-seventh time. Matsui, the series' MVP, took a ride around the field on his teammates' shoulders, grinning from ear to ear. There was much rejoicing, partying, and fanfare in the city affectionately known as the Big Apple. This was good news!

But just two hours south on I-95, in the City of Brotherly Love, Phillies' fans were having a very different reaction. The Phillies' hopes for a second World Series title in as many years had come to a screeching halt at the hands of Matsui. Their postseason run

was over, and they walked off into the night having fallen short yet again. To Phillies' fans (including this author), the Yankees' victory wasn't good news. It was a horrible but familiar fate for the Phillies — all hope and promise but no delivery. (It's difficult, but I'll spare you the boring details of other disappointments I've endured with Philadelphia sports teams over the years.) The point is this: Good news is subjective. We can't know whether news is good or bad for us unless we have enough information.

It's the same with the gospel. If we define the gospel merely as "the good news," we aren't providing enough information for others to know what that really means. Our Sunday-school definition may be a handy, concise description of the gospel, but it's entirely too narrow and limited to give people a clear grasp of what the gospel is all about and how it applies to their lives. But how can we define the gospel more clearly so that people will understand it, see that it really is good for them, and take a step or two closer to faith? How can we help others see that the good news can flow straight from the pages of the Bible into their lives?

One way is to expand the definition of *gospel*, to present it in broader terms so that people will not only grasp the big picture but will also understand why the gospel is good news for them personally. With that in mind, I'd like to offer this expanded definition: The gospel is the good news of what God did in Christ on my behalf.

Now that we have a broader definition to work with, let's explore it in depth and find out what it means for us personally.

*The gospel is the good news of what God did in Christ on my behalf.*

## **It's All about God**

The first thing we need to understand about the gospel is this: It isn't about us, even though we benefit from it. It's about what God has done. If we're honest, in the church we typically think of the gospel as something we *believe*. It's an idea or a concept that unlocks grace and forgiveness when we accept it by faith. But if we aren't careful, we may miss the truth that this good news of Jesus isn't only about something we believe; it's about something God has done — a beautiful and grace-filled work we're privileged to benefit from. Regardless of our awareness of it, or our faith in it, the good news is still about what God has done.

It's important to remember (or to realize for the first time) that the gospel wasn't plan B for God. He never had an "Oh no!" moment that we all have when our first choice blows up in our faces. There was no emergency council of the Trinity (God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) to figure out what to do after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden

fruit in the garden (Genesis 3). God's plan from the very beginning was to send his only Son to die in our place as a spotless sacrifice for our sin (our failure to measure up to his perfect standards). The apostle Paul wrote about this divine plan in his letter to Timothy:

[God] has saved us and called us to a holy life – *not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time*, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:9–10, NIV, emphasis added)

As difficult as it is for us to wrap our minds around, this was God's sovereign plan before Adam and Eve ever came on the scene, and God was "pleased" to execute it (1 Corinthians 1:21). In fact, this perfect plan of redemption forms the story line of all the Scriptures.

*God's plan from the very beginning was to send his only Son to die in our place.*

As God revealed his Word – the Bible – to us, he shared it in the framework of this plan. God, the righteous and holy Creator, promised his wayward children that our acts of rebellion (or sin) and the consequences of our disobedience wouldn't hold us in bondage forever. He would raise up a Deliverer, Judge, Prophet, and King to free us once for all from the penalty of sin and self-worship. This beautiful plan, revealed in the pages of the Bible and foreshadowed in Genesis 3:15, was fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus.

The gospel tells us that God himself did the work of saving us, and you know what? We needed him to do it! That's what makes the gospel *good* news. Because every one of us (the entire human race) is utterly incapable of fixing our sinful condition!

It's culturally and politically incorrect to say this, but I'll take the plunge anyway: The Bible teaches that we were born sinful, broken people (Psalm 51:5). Ephesians 2:1 says that we were "dead in . . . trespasses and sins." Our sin has separated us from a holy (pure and perfect) and righteous (just and upright) God (Colossians 1:21; 2:13–14). Not only are we separated from God because of our sin; we're as far away from him as

we can possibly fathom, “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).

The Greek word for “sin” (*hamartanō*) literally means “to miss the mark.” It describes someone who shoots an arrow at a bull’s-eye but misses not only the bull’s-eye but the entire target. (This is pretty much what happened the first time I ever shot an arrow. But the dog wasn’t injured that badly – and she recovered quickly!)

We often see ourselves as pretty good people, don’t we? With our good intentions and morally good deeds, we figure we just need a little help to reach the mark of God’s holiness, or perfection – like my two-year-old son who needs a boost to reach the sink at night to brush his teeth. We tend to think that we just need a boost, a lift, a little help to close the gap between us and God. How foolish and deluded a thought! Instead, we ought to think of ourselves as shipwrecked souls marooned on a tiny, deserted island in the middle of a vast sea, and God as the mainland a million miles away from us.

We find ourselves not needing a “boost” but totally depending on someone to pluck us off this isolated island. We’re lost and hopeless, desperately needing to find some way back home. But the truth is, on our own *we can’t get there from here*. As humans, we’re all in the same condition – dead in trespasses and sins, wandering in our own stupidity and rebellion, pursuing not our God and his desires but our own sinful lusts and passions (Ephesians 2:3). But just as we’re about to give up hope on that isolated island, languishing in the darkest conditions, God intervenes. The apostle Paul put it this way:

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Ephesians 2:1–3)

Quite a grim picture, isn’t it? A picture of hopelessness, desperation, and need – until God acts on our behalf.

Why is it important to remember God’s work in the gospel? Because we had no legitimate hope of doing anything about our “helpless estate,” as the hymn writer expressed so powerfully.<sup>1</sup> Into our brokenness and darkness came the glorious light of



the gospel—the message of God’s plan for redeeming the human race, rescuing us from our hopeless, desperate condition as sinners. God dreamed up this plan and brought it to life in Christ. The gospel is about the work God alone accomplished on our behalf.

*Into our brokenness and darkness came the glorious light of the gospel—the message of God’s plan for redeeming the human race, rescuing us from our hopeless, desperate condition as sinners.*

## Jesus Is the Only Way

To understand the good news, it’s also important to remember—or learn for the first time—that what God did on our behalf, he chose to do in Christ. Jesus is the only way we can be reconciled (brought back into a peaceful relationship) with God. God’s plan wasn’t a choose-your-own-adventure novel with multiple routes to the same end. To return to the example of being stranded on that deserted island, there aren’t a few dozen seaworthy vessels waiting to carry us safely to the mainland. God has provided only one way to get there.

Jesus boldly declared, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). This may offend our anything-goes cultural sensitivities today, but this is the biblical plan of salvation. In his grace and goodness, God chose to deliver, or rescue, us through one person: Jesus Christ.

*God chose to deliver, or rescue, us through one person: Jesus Christ.*

A quick scan of the Old Testament alone shows us that God has repeatedly chosen to work through one person—a single man, leader, head, or deliverer—to accomplish his purposes:

- Adam was the “head” of the human race, and in his single act of disobedience, he brought all of humanity under the curse of sin and death (Romans 5:12–19).
- Noah was the head of his family, and through him, they were all saved from the flood and given a new world to fill and populate (Genesis 6:9–9:1).
- Abraham was the recipient of the covenant God established to bless all the nations of the earth (Genesis 12:2–3; 17:1–7). Abraham was declared righteous because he placed his faith in God (Romans 4:3), and he became the father of all who believe in Christ (Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:29).

- Joseph was God’s point man and deliverer in a time of famine when his father, Jacob, sent Joseph’s brothers to Egypt in search of food. God preserved and protected his people through Joseph (Genesis 41:56 – 42:3; 43:4–8; 44:4–5) so that they flourished and became a great nation.
- Moses was the deliverer the Hebrew slaves had prayed for as they groaned and struggled under the weight of their slavery in Egypt (Exodus 2:23–25; 3:9–10).
- Moses was also a prophet who spoke God’s words to the Israelites (Exodus 24:1–3), a priest who interceded on their behalf before God (Exodus 32:11–14), and the mediator of the Law, who revealed God’s righteous standards to them (Exodus 20:1–22).
- Joshua, whose name means “savior,” was the point man through whom God led his people into the Promised Land (Joshua 1:1–9).
- The judges of Israel were a succession of deliverers whom God raised up to liberate his people from oppression (Judges 2:16–19).
- David was a man after God’s own heart (1Samuel 13:14), the king God sent into battle to deliver God’s people from their enemies and bring them unity and prosperity (2 Samuel 7 – 8).

All of this fascinates me. First, it shows me that God was working through his representatives, deliverers, judges, kings, and prophets to carry out his plan for his people. And this plan, regardless of cultural or political trends, moved on unhindered by circumstances. This gives us hope that in the chaotic and unpredictable world in which we find ourselves, God’s plan will still be brought to completion, no matter what.

Second, each of these examples provides us with a pattern, a “type” as theologians like to call it, that points us to God’s plan to rescue humanity through his Son, Jesus. Through that one sinless Man, the free gift of God’s grace shattered the darkness of sin and “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). In stark contrast to Jesus stands the first man, Adam, who rebelled against God. In Romans 5 we see the consequences of Adam’s act of disobedience compared with the results of Jesus’ act of obedience:

As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s [Adam’s] disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s [Christ’s]

obedience the many will be made righteous. (Verses 18–19)

This one act of obedience — Jesus’ sacrificial death on the cross for our sin — was God’s plan for reversing the death curse he had pronounced on Adam after he sinned (Genesis 3:19). In a beautiful and poetic turn of events, this second Adam, Jesus, who was acting as the Head of a new race, succeeded in all of the ways the first Adam failed. Jesus was obedient to the Father; he lived a holy, sinless life; and he didn’t give in to temptation. Jesus’ success in living a righteous life as a man gave Adam’s disobedient offspring (you and me) our only hope of being set free from the curse.

Through Jesus, the holy “offspring” or “seed” referred to in Genesis 3:15, God did an amazing work of reversing the curse and reconciling the world to himself. Jesus alone carried out the plan God set in motion from the very beginning of time, erasing Adam’s failure and winning the victory over sin and death.

Jesus made this agonizing decision to submit himself to his Father, even if it meant dying on a cross, and his single act of obedience changed the course of human history forever.

This reminds me of a life-altering decision I had to make in 1998 when I was just twenty years old. I was studying history at Liberty University, minding my own business, when I began to sense God’s “call” to ministry. It was one of those line-in-the-sand moments, if you know what I mean. I felt the weight of that decision like nothing I’d ever wrestled with before. But submitting to God and deciding to obey his call would set the course of my life on a radically different path.

It would have implications for marriage, since I couldn’t date and marry a girl who wasn’t willing to be in ministry. It would also have significant consequences for my children, who would be thrown into a “fishbowl” without any choice in the matter. They would discover very early in life what it means to be a pastor’s kid. Not an easy assignment! (My poor kids have found themselves featured as heroes in my sermon illustrations more often than they’d like. But our church has been great to them — gracious and understanding about this very difficult road they have to walk as pastor’s kids.)

Just as my decision to follow God’s call into ministry would impact my life and the lives of many others along the way, Jesus’ decision to follow God’s call to the cross has impacted millions of people across the span of time — and into eternity!

**God Did It for Me**

In the first two parts of our expanded definition of the gospel, we discovered that God alone came up with the plan to deliver us from sin, and he accomplished that plan through his Son, Jesus. This brings us to the final part of the definition: What God did in Christ was done *on my behalf*. What does that mean? Simple. What God did through Jesus on the cross was accomplished for you and me – not by us, not with us, not because of us. It was done *for us*.

Let's return to the illustration of my chubby two-year-old son who can't quite reach the bathroom sink. Before we're saved through faith in Christ, we're like my son. We aren't in need of just a little boost when it comes to reaching the standard of perfect righteousness (or upright living) that God requires of us. We aren't anywhere close to reaching it!

Romans 3:23 is pretty clear on that front: "*All have sinned and fall short of God's glory*" (emphasis added). It isn't that we're good people who fall an inch or two short of the goal. We're not anywhere close to the goal! Or to use another analogy, we haven't just swung and missed the fastball; we're not even playing on the same field. Instead, we're lost and helpless as though we're marooned on that isolated desert island I mentioned earlier, with "no phone, no light, no motorcar, not a single luxury." (Forgive the *Gilligan's Island* theme-song lyrics – it's been a long night.) As we've already discovered, we simply can't get "there" – God's standard of righteousness – from "here" – our inherently sinful condition. We, dear friends, are in trouble.

### *Rescued!*

Stuck on that desert island out in the middle of nowhere, we don't need help; we need to be rescued. We don't need someone to come alongside us and encourage us to just keep going so we can reach our goal. We'll never reach the goal; we need someone to reach it for us. We need someone to step in and do the job we can't do ourselves.

Enter Jesus.

In God's plan and by his grace, Jesus comes along and saves us precisely because we can't do it ourselves. We're hopeless and helpless and will never reach God's standard of perfection because of our sin and rebellion against him. This is, by the way, the classic understanding of the doctrine of depravity: that on our own, we can't do anything to earn the favor of a holy God. The only way we can gain God's favor is if he gives it to us. This is where the gospel becomes really good news for you and me!

*In God's plan and by his grace, Jesus comes along  
and saves us precisely because we can't do it ourselves.*

What we're talking about here is that Jesus acts as our substitute. In theology books, this is called "penal substitutionary atonement" and "vicarious" death. What this means in laymen's terms is that we owe a debt for our sin that we can't pay, but Jesus paid the debt for us. We stand guilty before God, condemned to death because of our sins, but Jesus stood in our place and took the penalty we deserved. Not only that, but the benefits and blessings of his death on our behalf – forgiveness of sin, new life in him, and eternal life with him when we die – have been given to us through faith in him. It's as if we've been convicted of committing a capital offense and are waiting on death row for our sentence to be carried out. But then Jesus comes and not only pardons us and wipes our records clean, but he also accepts the death penalty for us.

At this point you may be thinking, *Now wait a minute! I'm basically a good person. I've never done anything really bad. Certainly nothing deserving of death. What's this penalty thing all about?* It's simple, really – not popular, but not complicated. Over the course of our lives, all of us have accumulated a crushing debt of sins, faults, and shortcomings. As we read earlier, the Bible declares that each of us has fallen short of God's righteous standard (Romans 3:23). Every failure on our part to match God's standard in word, thought, or deed produces another penalty that's applied to our mounting deficit, until we find ourselves with a debt so staggering that even the US government would be shocked. Our debt is so huge, we can't possibly pay it. Not now or ever! Not only is the debt too costly, but we aren't even dealing in the proper currency.

Logic would have us believe that if *unrighteous* acts and attitudes produce a debt, then *righteous* acts or attitudes would help reduce or balance out our debt. If we follow this line of reasoning, every righteous thing we do would be applied to our "account" as a sort of payment, closing the gap between us and God. But the biblical truth is that our acts of righteousness, goodness, and morality are actually *offenses* to God; in fact, the prophet Isaiah said that "all our righteous deeds are like a polluted garment" (Isaiah 64:6)!

So, what do our "righteous deeds" do for the debt we owe? Absolutely nothing! The Central Bank of Righteousness rejects our payments outright as worthless, as though we attempted to purchase a \$250,000 home with a pocket full of lint, two BIC pens, and a pan of Mama's homemade lasagna. They simply don't help the cause.

Therein lies the great deception of every pagan cult and false religion that has ever existed: the belief that somehow, with good hearts, good intentions, and good deeds, we can pay down our debt. But God's Word tells us that "no one does good, not even one" (Romans 3:12). We can't do anything on our own to get rid of the debt we owe. For those who haven't accepted Christ's payment on their behalf, the penalty is going to fall

on their heads someday in the form of God's judgment. Their debt isn't going to magically disappear. They can work tirelessly their entire lives in an attempt to sway God's opinion and secure some kind of loan modification that puts the payments within their reach, but it will *never* happen. They'll simply be wasting their time, and before they can even begin to reconcile the debt, they'll breathe their last and slip into a Christless eternity, regardless of how many good deeds they've done.

In all honesty, God is completely unimpressed with our good deeds and unmoved by our good intentions. He isn't enamored with our church attendance, our committee involvement, our community service, or our Sunday-school teaching. The only thing that moves the heart of God to pardon, or forgive, the debt our sin has created is the perfect and complete righteousness of Jesus. The most amazing part of the gospel for you and me is that when Jesus died on the cross as the Lamb of God, the perfect sacrifice for sin, he took on himself our unrighteousness, sin, rebellion, hatred, rage, and all our other shortcomings. He shouldered that staggering debt as only he could. He wrote the check and paid the penalty. His righteousness has been applied to our "account" by grace through faith in him. And the Central Bank of Righteousness has stamped "Paid in Full" on our account statement. In the words of the old hymn writer, "Hallelujah, what a Savior!"<sup>2</sup>

The work God did in Christ *on our behalf* is the gospel's most precious truth for sinners. We should never let the wonder of this escape us! The reason the gospel is good news for us is that we never could have done it on our own.

*The work God did in Christ on our behalf is the gospel's most precious truth for sinners. We should never let the wonder of this escape us!*

### *All Expenses Paid!*

A couple of years ago, my wife and I were getting ready to celebrate our tenth wedding anniversary. At the time I was settling into a new home that needed a lot of repairs, starting a new ministry position as a very young senior pastor of an established church, and attempting to be a good father to our three children. An elaborate, or even minimal, anniversary celebration was going to be outside our grasp that year. And then, on New Year's Eve, we got a call from some great friends who invited us on a cruise to Cozumel – all expenses paid. "Come with us, cruise with us, kick back and relax in the Caribbean sun with us," they said. "We'll foot the bill!" Obviously, my wife and I jumped at the opportunity. (Did I mention we live in Upstate New York, and the cruise was in the dead of winter?)

A month later we left subfreezing temperatures and record snowfalls in New York and headed for Tampa. We boarded an elaborate floating resort in the seventy-five-degree Florida sun, with thousands of other vacationers who had sacrificed time, comfort, eating out, and other travel plans to save the money to go on this cruise. They had paid a steep price for this time at sea. Me? I was like a kid in a candy shop. I was blown away by the generosity of our dear friends, marveling at this free gift of grace they had given my wife and me. I knew we were there only by someone else's favor. We didn't deserve any of it – the meals, the service, the hand towels ornately folded to look like elephants, the exotic locations, the private beach clubs, the excitement and joy. We had earned none of it, paid for none of it. I was struck over and over with a sense of gratitude for the kindness and grace of our friends. Apart from their free gift, my wife and I wouldn't have been there. We couldn't have paid for the trip. It wouldn't have happened if it had been up to us.

The gospel is like that. Our debt was paid for us. On our behalf. Not to “help” us, give us a boost, or offer us a “hand up,” but precisely because we were, on our own, beyond help. We didn't deserve what Jesus did for us. And we could never have paid for it. Yet here we are, at this party, totally on Christ's dime. It's good news for that very reason. When we understand it that way, the gospel is the heart and soul of our joy in Jesus.

The gospel is the good news of what God did in Christ on my behalf!

Insert video “GospelChapter1.mp4” here

*Chapter 1 wrap up (3:54)*

(If your device does not support video content, go to <http://www.eciple.com/eciple-gospel> to view this clip)

## Discussion Questions

1. How would you define the gospel? What part of our definition of the gospel most resonated with you? Why?
2. Why do you think it's important to remember that God alone was the Designer and Architect of the plan of salvation?
3. The gospel informs us that Jesus is the only way to be reconciled to God. There is only one remedy for our sin: Jesus' sacrificial death on the cross. Why do you think it's so difficult for people to embrace the exclusivity (or only



way-ness) of the gospel? Why is it hard to think that other religious beliefs are wrong in light of Jesus' claim?

4. What does it mean for you personally that Jesus died on your behalf? In what ways is this act significant for you?
5. The death of God's Son was a steep price to pay for our redemption. How does understanding the price Jesus paid to save you impact your life today?

## Chapter 2

### How Does the Good News Reach Me?

A tale has been told of an epic battle between the Greeks and the Persians in 490 BC. As the Persians assembled on the plains of Marathon, awaiting the arrival of their exceptional cavalry, the Athenian army saw a golden opportunity for victory and seized it. They launched an attack, flanking the Persians and choking off their escape routes. The Greeks won the day, and the Battle of Marathon became a watershed victory in the Greco-Persian Wars. Many historians consider it a pivotal event in European history.

But there's more to the story. You see, this major conflict took place in what amounted to the "backyard" of Athens. Had the Persians succeeded in establishing a base at Marathon and then claimed the harbor on the Aegean Sea, Athens and the mighty Greek nation would surely have fallen. There was so much at stake in this battle, and the entire city of Athens anxiously waited for word from the front lines.

As the legend goes, a courier or "day-runner" named Pheidippides was seen approaching the city one day. He had run from the city of Marathon to Athens (a less-than-surprising distance of just over twenty-five miles) to deliver the good news that the Greek army had won the battle. This human carrier pigeon entered the great city and cried out, "Nike!" ("We were victorious!"). Then his heart gave out, and he collapsed and died in a heap as the Athenians broke out in joyful celebration. The message Pheidippides delivered that day meant freedom, hope, and a future for the Greek people.

In a similar way, the message of Christ's victory means freedom, hope, and a future for all who believe in him. And yet we would never have known about that victory and what it means if the message from the front lines had never reached us. But how, exactly, does the gospel message reach us today? How does it move from being just good news in general to good news that speaks to each of us in a very real and personal way? And if the gospel is all about what God did in Christ on our behalf, what part, if any, do we play in being saved? Let's find out!

## The Gospel Is Proclaimed

Before God's message of grace, forgiveness, and hope in Christ can transform us, it has to reach us. We need to hear the message to believe it. And the only way that can happen is if someone shares the good news with us. The apostle Paul expressed it well:

How then will they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without someone preaching? (Romans 10:14)

Paul's point was clear: No one can turn to Christ unless the gospel is first communicated. Those who never hear the gospel won't turn to Jesus ("call on him") or place their faith in him ("believe in him"). Before we trusted in Christ, someone somewhere at some time had to explain the gospel to us – that "in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them" (2 Corinthians 5:19). If that message hadn't reached us, we would have remained hopelessly lost in our sin, separated from God. In fact, the common thread in every gospel encounter is hearing about Jesus and what he did for us on the cross.

In my own gospel encounter, even though I'd grown up in the church and knew what the good news was, I didn't have a personal encounter with Jesus until I attended that Christian camp in Pennsylvania at the age of sixteen. One night during a chapel service, the gospel message grabbed hold of my heart, and I cried out to Jesus by faith. I'd heard the gospel message many times before, but when I heard it preached that night, something clicked. The pastor proclaimed the gospel, and I finally heard it and embraced it.

Hearing the gospel message is essential for faith in Christ, and that means someone has to proclaim it. Is it any wonder that immediately after his resurrection, Jesus commanded his disciples to go throughout the world proclaiming the good news of what he had done (Matthew 28:19-20)? These marching orders, known as the Great Commission, weren't just for the original twelve disciples. They were for all of Jesus' disciples, past and present! It's always been God's plan to use his followers as messengers of the gospel. Who better to tell friends and family members about God's gift of Jesus than those who've experienced that gift? A personal testimony of the gospel's power adds great credibility to the message itself.

*It's always been God's plan to use his followers as messengers of the gospel.*

In most areas of life, a personal testimony carries a lot of weight! Take the QVC home-shopping network, for example. Do you ever watch it? I try not to, but every now and then, I'll stumble onto something that really seems interesting (and by interesting I mean that it would completely change my life twice). If I really believed the overzealous hosts, I would jump at the opportunity to own the Little Giant Ladder or a juicer that's guaranteed to pulverize flax seeds so I won't need to do the difficult work of chewing them while downing my smoothie. Based on their testimonials, every product they sell is virtually guaranteed to provide joy and contentment. And let's be honest, it's tempting to pick up the phone, credit card in hand, and do a little impulse buying, isn't it? But do you know how many products I've *actually* purchased from QVC? Not even one. I'm too skeptical. That knife can't be that sharp; that device you connect to your vacuum can't really cut your hair; that steamer doesn't really clean floors that well. You know what they say, "If it sounds too good to be true, it probably is!"

I have some good friends who aren't nearly as skeptical as I am and purchase items regularly from QVC and other home-shopping networks. They tell me which products have delivered on their promises and which have failed miserably. Occasionally, they'll even recommend a product. In fact, just recently my wife and I bought a particular as-seen-on-TV steamer that we love. But do you know what tipped the scales for us? The personal endorsement of someone who had used the product.

Sharing the gospel is a bit like that. Those who have been transformed by God's grace through the gospel message are the very people God has "commissioned" to tell others about Jesus. They know firsthand just what kind of difference Jesus has made in their lives. They know who they used to be before they heard the good news. They remember the struggles and wounds of the past, the hopelessness and dissatisfaction they felt in life. And they know who they are today because they heard the gospel and placed their faith in Christ. They know the joy and peace Jesus has given them, and their personal testimonies move others to consider the gospel message. That's exactly how God planned it. In fact, just before Jesus returned to the Father, he shared this very plan with his disciples:

You will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth. (Acts 1:8)

Jesus told his disciples that they would be witnesses of God's saving work not only in Jerusalem but throughout the world. And as they faithfully carried that gospel message to the ends of the earth, people would be sure to hear it and respond in faith. The same happens when we, as witnesses of God's saving work in our own lives, share the good news with those around us.

Only a week and a half after Jesus spoke those parting words to his disciples, Peter proclaimed the gospel message to the Jews in Jerusalem:

Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs that God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know – this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. . . . This Jesus God raised up, and of that we all are witnesses. . . . Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified. . . . Repent and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. (Acts 2:22-23, 32, 36, 38)

Amazingly, right there in Jerusalem, "about three thousand souls" were added to the church that day (verse 41). Can you imagine if three thousand people were added to your church this weekend? What a powerful work God did that day in Jerusalem! And from there it was only a matter of time until the gospel message reached beyond Jerusalem and began to move around the world.

The book of Acts traces the spread of the gospel as the disciples carried it from place to place:

- Peter preached the gospel to the Jews in Jerusalem (Acts 2).
- Peter and John preached the message before the council of Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem (4:1-12).
- Peter and the other apostles preached the gospel in the temple courts and declared it again before the Jewish council in Jerusalem (5:17-32).
- Stephen (the first martyr of the church) preached the message before the Jewish council in Jerusalem (6:8 – 7:53).

- Persecuted believers fled from Jerusalem to Judea and Samaria, preaching the gospel wherever they went (8:1–4)
- Philip preached the gospel in Samaria (8:5) and shared it with an Ethiopian eunuch (verses 26–40).
- After his conversion, Paul immediately started preaching the gospel in the synagogues of Damascus (9:20–22).
- Peter shared the good news with Cornelius – a Roman centurion – and his family in Caesarea (10:30–48).
- Persecuted believers from Jerusalem were scattered as far as Antioch and preached the good news there (11:19–26).
- Paul preached the gospel message in the synagogues and cities he traveled to (9:19–22; 13:13 – 21:26).
- After his arrest, Paul presented the gospel to the Roman governor, Felix, and King Agrippa in Caesarea (24:22–25; 25:23 – 26:32).
- When Paul appealed to the Roman emperor, Caesar, he was taken as a prisoner to Rome, where he preached the gospel to Jews and Gentiles (28:17–31).

As followers of Christ have proclaimed, shared, preached, and taught the gospel message all over the world, the church has grown from a band of a few dozen followers in AD 33 to a vast army of the redeemed. The world has been turned upside down because God’s message was proclaimed!

## The Righteousness of God Is Revealed

When the disciples proclaimed the gospel message, something powerful happened: People’s hearts were moved by what was revealed in the message, and they responded by turning away from sin (repenting) and turning to faith in Christ. The same thing happened in my heart when I heard the gospel, and it happened in yours, too, if you’re a believer. Not everyone responds in faith, but unless the gospel is preached, hearts can’t be moved by what is revealed in the message.

But what exactly is revealed in the gospel? Romans 1:16–17 gives us a hint:

[The gospel] is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. *For in it the righteousness of God is revealed from faith for faith, as it is written, “The righteous shall live by faith.”*

(Emphasis added)

In the gospel, we hear about God's righteousness (his holiness and perfection) and begin to understand our own unrighteous condition. We begin to see that we can't save ourselves through our own goodness or morality. The gift God freely offers us in the gospel is based on Jesus' righteousness, not on our ability to keep the law and its requirements. If we haven't already figured it out by now, the gospel tells us that we can't reach God's standard of perfection by our own efforts. And we're doomed to fail if we try. But praise God! His righteousness doesn't depend on our ability to keep the law's demands. The apostle Paul put it this way:

The righteousness of God has been manifested [revealed] apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it – *the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe*. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. (Romans 3:21-24, emphasis added)

When I read this passage, what strikes me is not just my own hopeless, sinful condition but the immeasurable beauty of God's gift in Christ. We've all fallen short of God's perfect standard, but he has made a way for every one of us to be reconciled to him. It has nothing to do with our own goodness or ability to keep his standard or to act morally. Salvation (being rescued from our sin) is a gift, free for the taking. God has given us his own righteousness. As a result, we're "justified" in his sight, which simply means we're made right with him, considered righteous in his sight (Galatians 3:26-27). Only in the gospel do we hear that message!

*We've all fallen short of God's perfect standard,  
but he has made a way for every one of us to be reconciled to him.*

The shocking contrast between our sinful condition and the righteousness God offers us in Christ is often overlooked in our feel-good world today, and I'm sad to say, in many of our churches as well. And yet the depth of our sin and our desperate need for a Savior are the core message of the gospel.



A number of years ago, when I was serving as the youth pastor of my church, I had a fascinating conversation with our Christian teenagers about the fate of those who have never heard the gospel. When I asked them, “What exactly is it that sends a person to hell?” the overwhelming responses were “Not believing in Jesus” or “Not asking Jesus into your heart” (which, by the way, is *not* how the Bible describes faith). Their answers not only shocked me but revealed a misunderstanding I have since concluded was more than an isolated issue.

These kids had grown up in the church and had been exposed to a great deal of Bible teaching, and yet they thought that people slip into a Christless eternity based on what they do with the gospel message. If people haven’t had a chance to hear or consider that message, these teens reasoned, they are still in a “neutral” position as far as their eternal destiny is concerned. The only problem with that logic is the Bible doesn’t teach any such thing.

The real issue isn’t what we do with the gospel message; it’s the condition of our hearts and our standing before God. Here’s what the Bible says about it:

- We’re dead in our trespasses and sins (Ephesians 2:1–2). *Trespass* simply means breaking God’s laws or standards. God’s law is like a Do Not Trespass sign telling us not to violate a boundary. If we do, we’re guilty of breaking the law and are subject to whatever penalty the law determines is just.
- No one is righteous or holy in God’s sight; all of us have sinned and fall short of God’s glory, or perfection (Romans 3:10, 23). God alone is holy and righteous (1 Samuel 2:2; Psalm 89:6–8, 14). He is perfect, and we are not.
- Our sinful, rebellious natures make us God’s enemies, “alienated from the life of God” (Ephesians 4:18), “hostile in mind, doing evil deeds” (Colossians 1:21).
- As God’s enemies, we fully deserve his condemnation, wrath, and punishment because we haven’t met his perfect (or righteous) standard (Ephesians 2:3).

Is it just me, or is all of this a bit alarming? Based on what the Bible has told us about ourselves, the outlook isn’t good. Compared with the complete and perfect righteousness of Jesus, we are tainted, as unrighteous as we can possibly be. We don’t stand a chance. This is why each of us has been declared guilty before a holy God, and this is what sends people to hell, separated from God for eternity. Only in the gospel message do we hear of the true condition of our hearts and the real obstacle to enjoying abundant life on earth as well as spending eternity in heaven—our unrighteousness.

Some of you may find this a bit shocking, but we don't go to heaven because we say yes to Jesus or invite him into our hearts. Our only hope of eternal life with God and abundant life here on earth is to accept Christ's righteousness in place of our unrighteousness. Without that exchange, we're in serious trouble, even if we did fill out one of those salvation decision cards at youth camp or in Sunday school.

*Our only hope of eternal life with God and abundant life here on earth is to accept Christ's righteousness in place of our unrighteousness.*

## **The Message Is Received**

As the gospel message is proclaimed and we clearly see our sin in light of God's sinless perfection, we begin to realize that our relationship with God is hopelessly broken, and Jesus is the only One who can restore it. God's remedy in Christ is the only way we can be forgiven and brought back into right standing with our Creator.

Once we come to this realization, what do we do next? How can broken and imperfect people make peace with a holy and righteous God?

The answer is clearly stated in the Scripture passage we read earlier: "In [the gospel], the righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith" (Romans 1:17). Faith alone, from beginning to end, is the key to laying hold of God's righteousness. We must believe to receive it. The gospel message is like receiving an invitation to the most extravagant and luxurious ball ever given. If you simply stick the invitation to the refrigerator door but don't RSVP, you'll never reserve your seat with all the other guests. You may have every intention of attending the ball, but you have to accept the invitation if you want to enjoy the experience.

In the same way, when we receive God's invitation in the gospel, we need to accept it. We can't enjoy what God has promised us in Christ—forgiveness, a new life here on earth, and eternal life with him someday in heaven—unless we respond to his offer. But how exactly does all of this happen? It's actually rather simple. Behind the scenes, something amazing takes place.

*We can't enjoy what God has promised us in Christ—forgiveness, a new life here on earth, and eternal life with him someday in heaven—unless we respond to his offer.*

The Spirit of God stirs up faith in our hearts through the gospel message. He helps us understand the message and believe it. He shows us our need and the remedy for our

separation from God. That's when we ask, "What must I do to be saved?" (Acts 2:37; 16:30). At this point our faith translates into action, and we accept what Jesus did on our behalf, receive his righteousness as our own, and place our trust in him as Savior and Lord. This act of acceptance is what "believing" in Jesus or having "faith" in him means.

Perhaps this is a good time to discuss the difference between *faith* and *belief*. Have you ever noticed that the writers of the New Testament seemed to use these words interchangeably? In some places they wrote that whoever "believes" in Jesus will be saved (John 3:16 and Romans 10:4, 10-11, for example), and in other places they talked about being "saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8-9)? I'm not sure we think of these concepts the way the New Testament writers did. In today's world *belief* and *faith* seem to have two entirely different meanings.

This point was driven home for me during holiday celebrations with my children. In our family we have intentionally not included Santa Claus in our Christmas rituals or the Easter Bunny in our Resurrection Sunday celebrations. Don't get me wrong! I don't think you're a heretic if your kid sits on Santa's lap or leaves milk and cookies for him on Christmas Eve, or if you take your children to visit a ginormous egg-laying rabbit at the mall at Easter time. Our family has just decided to celebrate these occasions a bit differently. This, of course, has led to some stimulating family discussions when our kids hear what the other kids at their schools and our church do.

In their conversations with their friends about the holiday mascots, for example, the phrase *believe in* comes up a lot. Their friends "believe in" the Easter Bunny or Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy (which my kids somehow managed to believe in too, much to my chagrin). But what they mean by this isn't what the Bible is talking about. When people today use the word *believe*, they're typically referring to an opinion, assertion, or agreement about the nature of something. These kinds of beliefs are merely intellectual transactions—like believing in the Easter Bunny or Santa Claus or that the roughing-the-passer rule in the NFL is ridiculous. (Well, that last belief is more of a firm conviction.) We survey the evidence and arrive at a conclusion. We agree on an intellectual basis that something exists or is true.

If we were to ask people on the street if they *believe* in Jesus, they would most likely say yes. They would agree with us that Jesus was a historical figure who lived and died approximately two thousand years ago, that he was known for love and compassion, and that he had a great impact on society. But is that faith? I would say no. Simply agreeing that Jesus is real (like the Easter Bunny or Santa or the Tooth Fairy) isn't the same as having faith. The apostle James reminds us that "even the demons believe [in

God]—and shudder” (James 2:19). But demons aren’t saved through faith (they’re not saved at all!), so what does the Bible mean when it talks about faith or belief in Jesus?

Faith, my friends, is different from merely acknowledging that something exists. I can’t think of a better illustration of faith than a recent encounter I had with my two-year-old son, Noah. A couple of months ago, Noah was bounding down the stairs in our home. I was waiting for him at the bottom, chuckling to myself as he made his way from step to step, bouncing and jiggling the whole way. He stopped about five steps from the bottom, smiled from ear to ear, looked at me, and said, “Daddy, catch!”

Now, Noah is a big boy – while swimming at the community pool recently, he was playing with a five-year-old whom he literally towered over. He’s a big, thick (emphasis on thick) kid. I honestly wasn’t sure I wanted to catch him, but wisdom prevailed.

I checked with him first: “Are you sure, buddy?”

“Yeth!” he insisted.

“Okay,” I said and then waited.

When Noah made his move, I’m telling you, that kid flew! He didn’t just timidly fall into my already outstretched arms like some of my other children have done. He leaped headfirst, arms out in front like Superman, giggling and squealing as his chubby little body flew down the stairs into the loving (albeit strained) arms of his daddy. Now that’s faith!

This is what the Bible means when it talks about faith or belief. They’re both referring to the same thing: placing complete trust in the object of our faith. Noah exercised faith because he threw himself into my arms. He didn’t just see me at the bottom of the stairs and acknowledge that I was there. He actively placed his trust in me. He believed that I would catch him and wouldn’t let him fall.

I’m a Christian today not because I know the doctrines of justification by faith and salvation by grace but because, as a sixteen-year-old kid on the back side of a southeast Pennsylvania pig farm, I threw myself headlong into the merciful arms of Jesus. And do you know why I did it? Because I was convinced, persuaded, and arrested by the gospel truth that Jesus was the only way for a sinner like me to be made right with a holy and righteous God. Daddy, catch!

*I’m a Christian today [because] I threw myself headlong  
into the merciful arms of Jesus.*

The gospel is indeed something God dreamed up, planned, and brought to life here in our midst when he sent his Son to earth. God does the saving. He gives us the gift of

eternal life. As we hear the gospel message proclaimed in clarity and power, God moves in our hearts to convince us of our need for him. We see our own sinfulness in light of Jesus' perfect righteousness and the free gift of salvation God offers us. And as we respond to his invitation through faith, we're miraculously saved from our sin and reconciled to God. That, my friends, is a realistic look at how the good news reaches you and me. That's how the gospel has been reaching people for thousands of years. And it's how the gospel will continue to reach people until Jesus returns.

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*Chapter 2 wrap up (3:15)*

(If your device does not support video content, go to <http://www.eciple.com/eciple-gospel> to view this clip)

## Discussion Questions

1. Think about how the gospel was first proclaimed to you. Who shared it with you? When? What was the message you heard? Why were you so compelled to believe it? Now think of some ways *you* could engage in proclaiming the good news today.
2. How is the righteousness of God revealed? What does that even mean? And how does God's righteousness come to light through the teaching and preaching of the gospel?
3. Read Romans 3:19–23. What do the words "the righteousness of God was manifested apart from the law" mean (verse 21)?
4. When we hear the gospel message and realize that we're sinners in need of God's remedy for sin, what's the next step? What do we need to do with God's invitation before we can enjoy what God has promised us in Christ?
5. What is the difference between belief as we know it today and belief or faith as the Bible explains it? Could you relate to the story about Noah? Why or why not?

## Chapter 3

# How Does the Good News Change Me?

I don't know about you, but I'm a bit of a history freak. I studied it in college before sensing God directing me into the ministry. During that time, I read about zealous generals who led armies into battle after wars had already been won and treaties had been signed. They exposed their men to unnecessary danger, absorbed senseless casualties and collateral damage, and rubbed salt in the wounds of a defeated foe. From our perspective, in a globally connected world equipped with instant messaging and smartphones, such a tragic loss of life could have been avoided if only word of the war's end had been delivered to the front lines in time!

This illustration highlights something I've observed in my own life as a Christian and in the lives of many believers I've known. Many times my friends and I have been locked in senseless and unnecessary spiritual battles when the war has already been won. Our Commanding Officer, King Jesus, has secured the victory for us over our enemies by laying down his own life and defeating sin, death, and hell (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). So why do we still feel the need to fight the daily battle with sin on our own? How do we live now in light of what God has done in Christ on our behalf?

We've already learned that the gospel is the good news of what God did in Christ on our behalf, and we've discovered how that message reaches us. But what is the gospel's role in our sanctification as believers? (*Sanctification* simply means becoming more like Christ in our attitudes and behavior.) In other words, how does the good news change us and help us grow so that we become more like Christ?

In this chapter, we'll explore this very important issue. If we don't understand how the gospel message changes us and helps us grow spiritually, we can end up waging unnecessary battles, causing damage to ourselves and others in the process. We also run the risk of failing to experience the joyful, abundant life that Jesus' victory secured for us. Instead, our growth will be stunted, our lives won't be as rich and full as they could be, and we'll find ourselves wallowing in a perpetual state of misplaced guilt and shame.

For the good news to help us change and grow as believers, we need gospel reminders like the ones that renewed my love for Jesus and helped me rediscover joy and excitement in my faith in those early days. By keeping the free grace of Jesus in

front of us each day, the good news will impact every area of our lives and help us grow in our relationship with him.

Let's explore four ways the gospel changes us and impacts our growth in Christ.

## Where It All Begins

The gospel is the starting point, the gate through which each of us must enter to be reconciled to God and become "a new creation" in him (2 Corinthians 5:17). It's the foundation of our life in Christ. In fact, if we haven't heard the gospel message, believed it, and placed our trust in Christ, we aren't truly Christians. We may be good people, moral people, religious people, or God-fearing people, but we aren't followers of Christ. It's one thing all Christians have in common: We all came to God through the same door.

A number of years ago, shortly after my family relocated to Upstate New York, a good friend of mine invited me to join him and some friends on a hike in the Adirondack Mountains. The Adirondacks are home to some of the most beautiful hiking trails in the United States. Even though I'd never been on a hike of this magnitude, I didn't want to be seen as timid and fearful (even though I was), so I said yes. We hit the trail at five o'clock in the morning and walked and walked. And then we walked some more. We stopped to eat a few times but quickly got back on the trail for – you guessed it – more walking. After about eight hours of hiking through the wilderness, we arrived at our destination: a beautiful puddle of water nestled between a few of the famed Adirondack High Peaks – Lake Tear of the Clouds.

Maybe it was my youth and inexperience – or it could have been the shooting pains pulsing through my lower extremities – but I asked rather dejectedly, "Why is this lake so special?" That's when my friend informed me that we were standing at the headwaters of the Hudson River – the mighty waterway Henry Hudson first explored that snakes its way south to New York City. This historic landmark served as a highway of trade and commerce for centuries – and, unfortunately, a convenient "drain" for many of the factories located along its shores that once spewed toxic waste. This majestic river begins high in the Adirondacks, neatly tucked away, nearly eight miles from the road where we parked.

The "mighty" headwaters of the Hudson didn't look very imposing, grandiose, or impressive from my vantage point at Lake Tear of the Clouds. It looked more like a big pond. I really thought "lake" was a bit of a misnomer. But this lake is the origin, or source, of the Hudson, which flows out of the mountains, ever deepening and

expanding until it becomes a powerful waterway, spanning roughly 150 miles from Troy to Manhattan.

Just as Lake Tear of the Clouds is the source of the Hudson River, the gospel is the origin, or starting point, of our life in Christ. The Christian life begins with the gospel of Jesus Christ. It's the "headwaters" of our faith. Without Lake Tear of the Clouds, there is no Hudson River; without the gospel, there is no Christian life.

Through the gospel, we die with Christ, are buried with him, and are gloriously raised with him to live new lives (Romans 6:4). As we receive the gospel message through faith, God delivers us from the "domain of darkness" and transfers us to "the kingdom of his beloved Son" (Colossians 1:13). Through the gospel, we become "new creation[s]" in Christ as our old lives pass away and everything becomes new in him (2 Corinthians 5:17). Through the gospel, we embrace the abundant life Jesus died to give us (John 10:10) and begin the journey of becoming more like him (Romans 8:29).

That beats a big pond in the Adirondacks any day!

What does all of this have to do with our growth as believers? Revisiting the place where our faith in Christ began spurs us on to follow him more passionately. Remembering the love of Jesus and how he revealed himself to us through his gospel reignites our faith and joy. The gospel reminds us of our importance to him, the lengths he went to find us, and the beautiful moment when we placed our faith in him. This is where change and growth begin!

*Revisiting the place where our faith in Christ began  
spurs us on to follow him more passionately.*

## **Strength for the Journey**

The gospel is more than just the starting point of our faith in Christ. It has a continual impact on our lives as believers. Sometimes we treat the gospel like a medication, mistakenly thinking that when our "infection" is cured, we can stop taking it and get back to normal life. But the work of the gospel doesn't end just because our sins have been forgiven, our separation from God has been resolved, and we have a one-way ticket to heaven. It continues throughout the Christian life, strengthening our faith along the way. A friend recently commented that it would be a mistake to see the gospel only as the "runway" for our lives. We should also think of it as the jet fuel that keeps us going.



How does the gospel strengthen our faith as believers? How does it keep us going? By reminding us that we're not only unable to save ourselves, but we're also incapable, on our own, of living this new life God has given us in Christ. Jesus alone is the Source of our strength, and the role of the gospel is to point us to him as we "work out" our salvation by faith (Philippians 2:12-13).

*Jesus alone is the Source of our strength, and the role of the gospel is to point us to him as we "work out" our salvation by faith.*

This process of growing and working out our faith in Christ isn't at all easy. In learning what it means to be new creations in Christ, we experience countless twists, turns, and ripples along the way. As we trust God to help us "put to death" our sinful behaviors and "evil desires" (Colossians 3:5-9, NIV), and as we begin to "put on" the character and attitudes of Christ (verses 10-14), we slog through some difficult terrain. It's in this crucible of faith that we need strength—strength to change, strength to embrace new Christlike attitudes and emotions, strength to become new creations.

How do we find this strength? By keeping in front of us the gospel message that reminds us of what God did in Christ on our behalf, and by continuing to walk in that reality. The apostle Paul put it this way: "So then, just as you received Christ Jesus as Lord, continue to live in him, rooted and built up in him, strengthened in the faith as you were taught" (Colossians 2:6-7, NIV). Paul was encouraging believers to keep on living the way they started out: *by grace through faith* in Christ.

We didn't get here because of something we did. We didn't earn or deserve this seat at God's table. It was given to us as a generous gift when we placed our faith in Jesus. In the same way, we grow in our faith and our ability to live the Christian life only as we rely on Jesus, not on our own strength. Too often we can buy into the false self-help message that we're responsible for changing ourselves. We try hard to fix problem areas in our lives, attempting to discipline ourselves into maturity and Christlikeness. We may even try to reach our goal by following Jesus' example of faithfulness and godliness, compassion and character.

But it never works. No matter how hard we try, we can't change ourselves. Remember the story of Sisyphus in Greek mythology? He kept pushing a heavy boulder up a hill, only to see it roll back down to the bottom. Every single time, as he strained heroically to reach the top of the hill, the boulder would slip from his grasp and tumble back down. It's like that when we try to live the Christian life in our own strength. We

keep trying and failing. And in the end, we become frustrated, discouraged, and weary because we simply don't have what it takes to bring about that kind of change.

Enter the gospel. The good news reminds us that this work is God's, and it's his job to "bring it to completion" in our lives as we cooperate with him (Philippians 1:6). There is great strength in that thought alone. We are all works in progress, and God is responsible for making us new. In fact, he's actively working to do that right now! When we wrap our minds and hearts around God's gracious work in the gospel and root ourselves in Jesus, we find the strength and power to change, because the power to change comes from him alone. He is the One who shapes and molds our character so that we'll reflect him. And the more we trust and cooperate with him in this process, the more we'll see the results of our faith: new thoughts, new habits, new attitudes, new affections, new desires, and a new identity. It's his job to transform us. It's our job to get out of his way.

*In Jesus, we find the strength and power to change,  
because the power to change comes from him alone.*

## **Free at Last!**

Another way the gospel changes us as believers is by setting us free from those things that hold us captive and prevent us from living our lives fully and joyfully in Christ. I spent my entire childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood among believers in the church who knew their desperate need for a Savior and were convinced that the gospel was their only hope of being reconciled to God. But when it came to living as Christians, they were unsure about what God required of them. And in their uncertainty, they adopted a lifestyle of shoulds and oughts, as if sheer willpower and self-discipline – exhibited by their attempts to quit smoking cigarettes, stop watching R-rated movies, or devote the first two hours of their day to prayer – would bring about the spiritual growth they desired and fuel their affection for the Lord. As a friend of mine likes to say, they were saved by grace but were trying to earn their keep.

After I trusted Christ, I adopted the beliefs and practices of my church community, thinking I would become more spiritual if I followed that same path. I'd attend summer camps and revival meetings, and I'd hear from God's Word about these oughts and shoulds. I'd compare my life with God's righteous standards in the Bible and knew I wasn't measuring up to them. I clearly wasn't living a "life of love" the way Christ loved me (Ephesians 5:2, NIV), or a life that was "worthy of the gospel" (Philippians

1:27). I wasn't submitting my anger, lust, pride, and envy to the Lord in a way that was pleasing to him. I wasn't walking in faith the way he desired (2 Corinthians 5:7). I wasn't saturating my life with his Word as I should have been.

By the time I finished sizing up my spiritual condition, I'd feel totally convicted. I'd repent of my shortcomings and leave those meetings with such passion and energy to go back to my normal life and be the person God wanted me to be. I'd make commitments, decisions, and promises – some of them quite publicly at our Thursday-night Campfire services. I vowed in front of my peers and my church to be different, to live differently, to change what was broken about me and become the man God was leading me to be. I promised to work harder to change.

After these meetings, I'd come home excited and more committed than ever to double my efforts at living for Christ. I'd get up early and attempt to establish a faithful devotional life. I'd try to stop fighting with my parents. I'd try to stop cursing. But the craziest thing happened. Well, actually, *nothing happened*. I couldn't do it. I couldn't fix me. I couldn't live up to the new commitments I had made, couldn't stop the stuff I wanted to stop and start doing the things I wanted to do. I was conflicted, discouraged, and confused.

I've met a lot of people who share similar struggles. They're continually disillusioned by their own weaknesses and inability to live a Christlike life. They're unsure about how to grow in their knowledge and understanding of the Lord. They're discouraged to find that as Christians they still can't measure up to God's righteous standards on their own.

When I see these dear brothers and sisters, I can't help but ache for them. Like so many of us, they haven't yet understood or experienced the incredible freedom they have in Christ. Without a biblical understanding of the freedom found through the gospel, we continue to find ourselves burdened by a load of guilt and shame. But even more tragic, we miss out on the joyful and abundant life Jesus desires for us (John 10:10). The war is over, but we're still sending our troops into battle.

*Without a biblical understanding of the freedom found through the gospel, we continue to find ourselves burdened by a load of guilt and shame.*

Freedom from all the shoulds and oughts of living the Christian life is found in the gospel. But what kind of freedom?

## *Freedom from Bondage to the Enemy*

First, the gospel frees us from bondage to the enemy of our souls – Satan. Before our gospel encounter, we’re deceived and led astray, enslaved by our passions and desires, and blindly following our enemy through this life (Ephesians 2). We think we’re free, but we aren’t. It’s an illusion. In reality, we’re bound and imprisoned by our sin. John 8:34 tells us that “everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin.” And because we’re slaves, we’re easy prey to an enemy who seeks our destruction and harm. Like a “roaring lion,” Satan prowls around “seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).

But in the gospel we learn that Jesus, our King, defeated his enemy and ours by giving his life for us on the cross. We also discover that Jesus conquered sin and death when he was raised from the dead (Luke 24; 1 Corinthians 15), breaking the chains that have bound us and setting us free. We’re no longer slaves to sin. Jesus’ victory is ours through faith in him!

Regardless of the quiet whispers of the Enemy, you and I are no longer guilty before God! We have no reason to be ashamed any longer, because Jesus took away all of our guilt through his loving sacrifice. Those heavy burdens are no longer ours to carry.

Satan loves to remind us of all our failures and shortcomings and tempt us to believe that our loving heavenly Father is like a harsh earthly father whose approval and love are based on our performance. But the gospel message assures us that God accepts us not because of our own righteousness but because of Jesus’ righteousness.

Romans 8:1 tells us that “there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.” The Enemy, who accuses us day and night before God, no longer has any claim over us (Revelation 12:10). He can’t condemn us or hold us captive anymore because Jesus, our Substitute, has set us free! And if Jesus has set us free, we are “free indeed” (John 8:36).

*[The Enemy] can’t condemn us or hold us captive anymore  
because Jesus, our Substitute, has set us free!*

## *Freedom from the Demands of the Law*

The gospel also frees us from the demands of the law. This law – God’s perfect standard of righteousness – encompasses the entire Old Testament, including the Ten Commandments and the first five books of the Bible (the Pentateuch), and the commands in the New Testament. It’s the standard we weren’t able to live up to before we were saved, and we can’t live up to it now as believers. But all too often, we think we have to try. (And we know from firsthand experience how those efforts turn out!)

James 2:10 says, “Whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it” (NIV). That’s a pretty brutal standard! And yet many Christians feel horribly guilty and ashamed because they can’t live up to it. It becomes a burden and a continual discouragement to them. They feel as though they’re still shackled to their sin even though they put their faith in Jesus. They feel as though they can’t measure up, and they see themselves as failures. Some have even abandoned the faith because of their struggle.

What does the gospel say about this? It tells us that Jesus set us free not only from bondage to our enemy but from bondage to the law itself. This powerful truth is often overlooked or denied, but it’s essential to living the Christian life.

*Jesus set us free not only from bondage to our enemy  
but from bondage to the law itself.*

When we see the law for what it is and understand Jesus’ death for what it is, it becomes clear that as believers we’re no longer “under law but under grace” (Romans 6:14). The apostle Paul explained what this means in Romans 8:1-5:

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For *what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature [flesh], God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. He condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fully met [fulfilled] in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature [flesh] but according to the Spirit.* (NIV, emphasis added)

Did you see it? God’s law has a fatal flaw, a weakness. It doesn’t make people holy, righteous, or perfect. There, I said it. Let the scorn begin. Too many of the Christians I meet believe that God’s acceptance or approval depends on their ability to obey the law. But to see the law and its requirements as something attainable is to fundamentally miss what the good news is all about.

The law was never intended to make us holy or righteous. In God’s plan, its purpose was to show us our inability to live up to his righteous standard. And instead of giving

us new life, the law declares that all of us deserve death by relentlessly pointing out our sins, failures, shortcomings, and rebellion against God. In our own strength (our “flesh” or our sinful human nature), we’re too weak to live up to God’s standard. Too weak to keep the law in all its points. Too weak to earn or work our way to righteousness.

This double-edged flaw – the weakness in us and in the law – is precisely why Jesus had to die on the cross. We needed him to free us from the law’s impossible demands, and God was faithful to provide. Jesus, by living a sinless life on earth, did what we could never do: He kept the law perfectly. And when he died, he did so innocently. He hadn’t committed any crime. He had no sins, shortcomings, or failures. He was, and is, righteousness personified. And because he never sinned, his sacrifice on the cross fully satisfied the law’s demands.

But that’s not all! The flaw in the law and in ourselves, which prevents us from living up to God’s standard, points us to a new way of living as believers. The key is found in Romans 8:4: “The righteous requirement of the law [is] fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh [sinful nature] but according to the Spirit.” When we live by faith in Christ, God gives us the ability to obey the law – not in our own efforts, but by the power of his Spirit. And with God’s power fueling our efforts, we can’t fail!

The gospel reminds us that Jesus set us free from the demands of the law so we can be truly free to enjoy all he’s given us (Galatians 5:1). It also shows us how to live the kind of life God always intended for us as his children. A life overflowing with forgiveness and grace instead of guilt and shame. A life characterized by the “fruit” God promises – “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self control” – when we live by faith through the power of his Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23). There’s “no law” against these things (verse 23), so we can indulge in them to our heart’s content!

*The gospel reminds us that Jesus set us free from the demands of the law so we can be truly free to enjoy all he’s given us.*

## **A Framework for Spiritual Growth**

Finally, in addition to giving us a foundation to build on, strength for our journey, and freedom from bondage, the good news changes us by giving shape and meaning – a structural framework – to our lives in Christ. This is probably the most important way the gospel transforms us and helps us grow in our faith. Like a computer’s operating system, the gospel is the foundation we build our faith upon. Colossians 2:6-7 reminds

us once again, “Therefore, as you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, *rooted and built up in him and established in the faith, just as you were taught*, abounding in thanksgiving” (emphasis added).

With the gospel as the foundation of our faith, what framework does it provide for our spiritual growth? A life lived *by grace through faith*.

### *Living by Grace*

As we’ve seen throughout this book, grace plays a central role in our conversion when we first come to Christ. We’re saved by the undeserved, unearned favor of God himself, not because of anything we’ve done. It’s a free gift. And that gift is given to us by God’s grace when we place our faith in Christ.

I don’t know any genuine believer who would disagree with that statement. But when it comes to living as followers of Christ, it isn’t always clear how grace applies. It’s all too easy for us to fall back into the performance trap, trying to earn our keep, and to lose sight of the fact that just as we were saved by God’s grace alone, we’re kept by his grace alone.

*Just as we were saved by God’s grace alone, we’re kept by his grace alone.*

This should lift a huge burden from your shoulders! Because of grace, Jesus still loves and accepts you even when you mess up (which you’ll inevitably do, because you won’t be perfect till heaven!). None of us is on this team because we had it all together when Jesus saved us. And none of us maintains our spot on the roster by our own efforts. We’re where we are because of God’s gift of grace and Jesus’ perfect sacrifice.

I should point out here that living by grace doesn’t mean it’s okay for us to live like rebels and reprobates, indulging every passion and pleasure. Living by grace should never lead to unrestrained sin. As the apostle Paul said in Romans 6:1-2, “Are we to continue in sin that grace may abound? By no means! How can we who died to sin still live in it?”

Instead, we should resist those sinful patterns with all of our might. Colossians 3:5 tells us to “put to death [or kill] . . . whatever belongs to [our] earthly nature” (NIV). We should seek to honor God in our decisions and actions. We should seek God’s help to reject anything in our lives that is hurtful to others. We should indeed do all of this. But as we do, we need to continually remind ourselves of the gospel. We need to keep in mind that we aren’t doing these things to earn God’s approval, but because God has already accepted us in Christ. Instead, we offer him our lives as a way of saying “thank



you” for the free gift of his grace. Good works flow from grateful hearts that have received God’s grace.

### *Living Out Our Faith*

The second way the gospel provides a framework for our spiritual growth is through faith. We were saved by placing our faith, or trust, in what Jesus did for us on the cross: “By grace you have been saved through faith” (Ephesians 2:8). In the same way, we grow in our lives as believers by trusting him. But when we start trying to live out this truth, things get a little muddied. How do we live and grow as believers through faith? Very simply, it means that *we believe God and act accordingly*.

Isn’t that how our gospel stories began? Someone somewhere shared with us the message of God’s immeasurable love, and when we heard what Jesus did on our behalf, something clicked inside us. We recognized that the message was true, we realized our need, and we responded in faith. We believed God’s Word and placed our trust in Christ. Why, then, would we expect our journey with him to be any different?

Second Corinthians 5:7 reminds us that “we live by faith, not by sight” (NIV). As we wander through this life, bumping from one experience to the next, living by faith means listening to Jesus and choosing to trust him moment by moment. It means putting our faith into action as we encounter relationships, challenging circumstances, major and minor events, failures and successes, joys and sorrows. No matter what we experience in life, we trust that our loving Father will take care of us.

*Living by faith means listening to Jesus and choosing to trust him moment by moment.*

So when you lose your job, living by faith means that you don’t lose heart, because you believe that God will provide for your needs and will never leave you or forsake you (Philippians 4:19; Hebrews 13:5). When you’re diagnosed with cancer, you don’t give in to despair, because you believe that Jesus has prepared a home for you in heaven (John 14:1–3), and someday soon, this broken world will fade away, and you’ll spend eternity with him. When you lose a loved one, you trust God to comfort you as he promised (2 Corinthians 1:3–4). Living the Christian life through faith means all of this and so much more!

### *Guidelines for Spiritual Growth*

As we wrap up this discussion of the gospel’s role in our spiritual growth, I’d like to



offer four practical guidelines for growing in your relationship with Christ:

1. *Hold on to the things of "first importance"* that the apostle Paul spoke of in 1 Corinthians 15:3-4: "that Christ died for our sins . . . , that he was buried, and that he was raised [to life]." The gospel message contains not only everything you need for salvation but everything you need for living the Christian life (2 Peter 1:3-8). Each of us desperately needed Jesus to save us because we couldn't save ourselves, and we still need him as believers because we can't change ourselves. Live in light of that truth every day.

*The gospel message contains not only everything you need for salvation but everything you need for living the Christian life.*

2. *Stay connected to the Source of your life.* Seek to walk closely with Jesus and live in moment-by-moment dependence on him. In John 15:4-6, Jesus told his disciples,

Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. . . . Apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers.

The point is clear: If you try to live the Christian life on your own, apart from Jesus' life-giving power, you'll be like a branch separated from the vine – you'll wither! The only way you can bear "fruit" is to stay connected to the Vine.

3. *Cooperate with God in your spiritual growth.* Philippians 2:12-13 offers an excellent description of the difference between God's job and yours as a believer: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure." God's work always comes first in saving you and making you like him. As he works in you, giving you the desire and ability to live a life that pleases him, you can then perform your "work" by cooperating with him in the process. Second Peter 1:3, 5-7 also reflects this cooperative relationship with God:

His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness through our knowledge of him [Jesus] who called us by his own glory and goodness. . . . For this reason, make every effort to add to your faith

goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness, love. (NIV)

God is your power Source for living this life, but you also play a key role in developing godly qualities. Remember: It's his job to change and transform you. It's your job to get out of his way.

4. *Surrender control of your life to the Holy Spirit.* God is the One who empowers you to live the Christian life through the Holy Spirit. (We'll talk more in depth about the Holy Spirit in another book.) The more control you give him over your life, the more you'll become like Jesus, and the more you'll experience the abundant life Jesus spoke of in John 10. The apostle Paul described the stark contrast between a Spirit-controlled life and a sin-controlled life: "The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace" (Romans 8:6, NIV).

As believers, we often struggle with giving God control of our lives, and we don't do it perfectly. But we need to remember that we're on a lifelong journey. Spiritual growth is a gradual process; it doesn't happen overnight, as much as we wish it did. So when you slip up (and you will!), don't get discouraged. Take your sins and failures to Jesus, accept his forgiveness, and get back on track. Remember 1 John 1:9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." Because of the gospel, you know where to go with your sin!

*When you slip up (and you will!), don't get discouraged. Take your sins and failures to Jesus, accept his forgiveness, and get back on track.*

Insert video "GospelChapter3.mp4" here

*Chapter 3 wrap up (3:54)*

(If your device does not support video content, go to <http://www.eciple.com/eciple-gospel> to view this clip)

## Discussion Questions

1. In your understanding, how does the good news change you? In what specific ways has the gospel made a difference in your life? How has it given you strength for your journey of faith?
2. What kind of freedom has Jesus secured for us? Why is it so difficult for us to understand and embrace that freedom?
3. What is the remedy for misunderstanding the freedom Jesus has given us?
4. The gospel provides a framework for our lives. What is that framework? Discuss how your life in Christ is lived *by grace through faith*.
5. Which of the guidelines for spiritual growth do you most need to apply in your life? Explain.

## Conclusion

# Changed Lives

My earnest desire is that you have found this e-book challenging, thought-provoking, and informative. I can't think of another topic that is more important or beneficial to ponder than the gospel of Jesus. As you reflect on what you've learned in this book, I hope you'll take away a few key points.

First, keep in mind that the gospel is God's work alone. Not mine. Not yours. Not anyone's. We've been saved from sin and hell and the law's demands not because we're so great but because *God was so gracious* in giving his Son, Jesus, to die on our behalf and offer us new life in him. His gift was freely given to us through no merit of our own. So we have *nothing* to boast about before God, except for his grace.

Second, keep in mind that the gospel message is powerful. Be a faithful steward of it. Love and cherish it. Share it well, because you know that in it the "righteousness of God is revealed" (Romans 1:17). This righteousness makes all the difference. It represents life and hope for people all around the world who are lost in sin and darkness, crying out for someone to set them free.

Third, allow this beautiful gospel to provide the framework for your life. You aren't bound to the law anymore if you're a Christian. You aren't enslaved to sin or bound to Satan any longer either. You aren't condemned by your past or your weaknesses anymore. Let the gospel remind you of who you are: a child of God through faith in Jesus, a cherished and prized possession of our King. You're living not to earn God's approval but out of gratitude for his amazing grace.

*Let the gospel remind you of who you are: a child of God through faith in  
Jesus,  
a cherished and prized possession of our King.*

Finally, enjoy the work God is doing in you to change and shape you into who he wants you to be. Cooperate with him in this venture, and keep the gospel in focus. Let it renew your faith and reignite your love for Jesus as you remember the gospel encounter where your journey first began.

This coming Sunday, I'll have the great privilege of standing once again before the congregation I've been serving for more than seven years now. I'll open the Bible and

pray that God will do what he does best: empower the message and speak to people exactly what they need to hear.

As I do that, I'll look out over the audience and see evidence of the gospel at work. I'll see reformed hippies and drug dealers God has changed through the good news. I'll see a former alcoholic and Irish fire chief who was radically delivered by the grace of Jesus, when his five-year-old granddaughter shared it with him. I'll see an ex-convict who today holds master keys to every building on our campus and who is one of my most trusted helpers. Up until his health prevented him, he had a job cleaning bank vaults, because the gospel set him free from himself and from our enemy. I'll see prodigal sons who returned to Christ and are raising their growing families in faith because of the gospel.

Throughout this place of worship, I'll see engineers and professors, retail clerks and garbage collectors, business owners and waitresses, secretaries and soldiers, World War II vets and yuppie soccer moms, college students and nurses, Democrats and Republicans, blacks and whites, Asians and Filipinos, Latinos and Europeans, and young and old – all of us together celebrating with one voice this wondrous gospel that changed us. Rejoicing in God that we're no longer who we used to be. What a life I lead!

My prayer is that you, too, have been saved by grace through faith in Christ and are in the habit of celebrating God's life-changing work with a community of believers who have heard this same gospel message and are being changed by the good news of what God did in Christ on our behalf. May you be powerfully transformed and continually reformed by that gospel and its work in your life.

Blessings, friends!

Insert video "GospelWrapup.mp4" here

*Conclusion wrap up (3:12)*

(If your device does not support video content, go to <http://www.eciple.com/eciple-gospel> to view this clip)

# Notes

## *Chapter 1*

1. Horatio G. Spafford, "It Is Well with My Soul," copyright © 1873, public domain.
2. Philip P. Bliss, "Hallelujah, What a Savior!" copyright © 1875, public domain.

## Recommended Reading

For some more resources on the good news of Jesus, I recommend any of these fine books:

Chase, Mitchell L. *The Gospel Is for Christians*. Brenham, TX: Lucid Books, 2010.

Gilbert, Greg. *What Is the Gospel?* Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010.

Tchividjian, Tullian. *Jesus + Nothing = Everything*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011.

## About the Author

Matt Eachus is a Christian, a husband, a father, a pastor, and an author who thoroughly enjoys the busy life God has given him. After spending his childhood in southeast Pennsylvania, Matt graduated from Liberty University in 2001 and Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary in 2010.

He currently serves as lead pastor of Temple Baptist Church in Halfmoon, New York, a growing multigenerational church in the Albany suburbs. He has a passion for teaching the Bible, for serving the church of Jesus, and for planting churches so that more people can know the life-changing power of the gospel. A gifted speaker and teacher, Matt has a heart for helping people understand the deep things of God in ways that connect with their daily lives. He enjoys ministering to his congregation, to teenagers at camps, and to pastors and church planters. His desire is that God would use him to encourage and equip the church at large.

Matt and his wife, Amanda, live in Clifton Park, New York, with their four young and very active children. They spend their days in a furious blur of T-ball, gymnastics, soccer, and school activities, all the while attempting to cherish each fleeting moment. In his downtime, Matt enjoys dark coffee, reading, hiking in the Adirondacks, and spending time with his family.