

# The Gospel

The word *gospel* is used 97 times in the Bible. Paul uses it most - some 64 times in his letters. The most frequent occurrences are in *Galatians* (13 times) and *Romans* and *First Corinthians* (11 times each).

More important than the number of occurrences is the meaning of the term.

The gospel writers Matthew and Mark both speak of Jesus Christ "proclaiming the gospel". This he began to do in Galilee (*Matthew 4.23; Mark 1.14*). But he also preached in Judah, most notably in the temple in Jerusalem (*Luke 20.1*).

Paul tells us he was "set apart for the gospel" (*Romans 1.1*). He calls it the "gospel of God". Mark uses the same term (*Mark 1.14*) but also calls it "the gospel of Jesus Christ" (*Mark 1.1*). Matthew prefers the title "gospel of the kingdom" (*Matthew 4.23, 9.35, 24.14*).

These three terms point us to the author (*God*), the substance (*God's provision in Jesus Christ*), and the consequence of the gospel (*enjoying God and his rule*).

## ***The Gospel of God***

When Paul said goodbye to the leaders of the church in Ephesus he reminded them about his calling. It was to finish the work given to him by God. That work was "to testify to the gospel of the grace of God" (*Acts 20.24*). It was an exceedingly joyful work. It was also solemn and serious, as the Greek word translated *testify* indicates.

How is it that the work of making good news known is solemn? Because it needs to be understood in context. In fact, failure to appreciate the plight of mankind results in a distorted and wrong view of the gospel.

In what situation is mankind? The answer - from the human point of view - is a hopeless state. As Paul says in his letter to the Ephesian churches, by nature we are 'dead'. Twice over he reminds us that, before coming to faith in Christ Jesus, we are "dead in our trespasses and sins" (*Ephesians 2.1 & 5*). We are dead to God (*not in a right relationship with him*), content to be separated from him, and under the sentence of death. Paul calls us 'children of wrath' - that is children who deserve to experience the displeasure of God for eternity.

Sadly that is precisely what happens to those not reconciled to God. Paul reminds us in Romans 6 (v23) that sin pays a wage. Its wage is death. The prophet Ezekiel understood this. God informed him "the soul who sins shall die" (*Ezekiel 18.4*).

Eternal death (*hell*) is what each sinner deserves. Death is the just penalty for defying God. Such willful and persistent disobedience is an offence to him. He is pure and perfect. No-one impure can (or shall) dwell in his presence. If we would go to heaven, and be right with God, someone must take the penalty for our sins.

This is the good news God wants us to know. In eternity, before the creation of the world, God planned to rescue his people from their sins. It is something they do not deserve. It is all of grace - the unmerited love and kindness of God to undeserving people.

It does not surprise us therefore that Paul speaks of the "gospel of the grace of God" (*Acts 20.24*). Nor does it surprise us when he calls it "the gospel of God" (*Romans 1.1*). It's origin lies with God. It is not an invention of mankind. We are incapable of devising the way of escape. There is absolutely nothing we can do to satisfy the justice of God. As those dead in sin we need to be made alive. The dead cannot give themselves life. It must be imparted by another. God is the giver of life. He alone can make us alive. The fact that he offers life freely to all in Christ Jesus is the gospel of God.

### ***The Gospel of Jesus Christ***

The gospel writer Mark is explicit. He starts his account of the life (and death) of Jesus with these words: "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (*Mark 1.1*). In

so doing he seeks to stress a great truth. The purposes and plans of God all centre on Jesus Christ.

God is triune. That does not mean there are three Gods. There is only one God. He exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Latin-writing theologian Augustine describes him as the One who is truly Three. The Greek-writing theologians Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nyssa describe him as the Three who were truly One. The English-speaking theologian Jim Packer reminds us that "the One tri-personal God, our God, operates as a team".

In eternity, before the world was made, God purposed the Son would become a man. Why did the eternal Son become a man in the fulness of time? For two reasons. First, to live the life we can never live - a life of perfect obedience. And secondly, to die the death we deserve to die for ever.

In doing both for us the justice of God is satisfied. His perfectly right life (his righteousness) is reckoned as ours the moment we have faith in him. And the hell he endured on the cross was to ensure the penalty for our sin was paid.

This is the heart of the good news of God. Because its focal point is the Jesus of Nazareth born to a virgin, Mary, it is called the gospel of Christ (*Romans 15.19*) as well as the gospel of God (*Romans 15.16*).

### ***The Gospel of the Kingdom***

Why is it also called the gospel of the kingdom? This, you will recall, is the term used by Matthew and Mark in their accounts of the life of Jesus. He went, they tell us, into cities, villages and synagogues to teach and proclaim the gospel of the kingdom.

The term kingdom refers not to an earthly kingdom (*like the United Kingdom, a political unit which has HM The Queen as the head of state*), but to God's rule. In John 3 we read a leader of the Jews called Nicodemus visited Jesus one night. In their meeting Jesus spoke about seeing (*verse 3*) or entering the kingdom of God (*verse 5*). Specifically he informed Nicodemus of the need for the Holy Spirit of God to make us new. Without such a spiritual transformation no one will ever enter the kingdom of God.

Those born again from above are not just assured of being forever with the Lord in the new heavens and earth.

They are called to live for God. Those made new by God's Spirit demonstrate he empowers them to do that. The evidence is seen in the way they gladly and willingly submit to God's Law and rule.

In our natural unchanged state we resist God, reject his rule, and rebel against him. The term for this is lawlessness (*1 John 3.4; see also Romans 6.19*). But those made new by the Holy Spirit are those who delight in God's law (*see Psalm 119 for an extended description of a godly person*). They live by it, not to gain forgiveness - that is impossible - but out of thankfulness for what they enjoy in Christ Jesus.

### ***The Power of God***

There is another important fact about the gospel. It is described by Paul as being "the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes" (*Romans 1.16; cf 1 Corinthians 1.18 and Revelation 12.10*). Because that is so Paul was "not ashamed" of it (*Romans 1.16*). On

the contrary he remained "eager to preach the gospel" (*Romans 1.15*), knowing that is what God called and equipped him to do (*Romans 1.1*).

Milton Vincent reminds us:

Outside of heaven, the power of God in its highest density is found inside the gospel. This must be so, for the Bible twice describes the gospel as "*the power of God*". Nothing else in all of Scripture is ever described in this way, except for the Person of Jesus Christ (*1 Corinthians 1.24*). Such a description indicates that the gospel is not only powerful, but that it is the ultimate entity in which God's power resides and does its work.

*A Gospel Primer, p14f*