

# ***WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?* BY GREG GILBERT**

## **A STUDY GUIDE**

### **INTRODUCTION**

**Meeting agenda:** To establish the importance of looking into this subject—what is the gospel?

**Note:**

Gilbert states his goal in this book: “I want to try in this book to offer a clear answer to that question [what is the gospel?], one that is based on what the Bible itself teaches about the gospel” (pp. 20).

**Suggested questions and texts for discussion:**

1. Do you think Gilbert’s right when he says that “a general fog of confusion [among Christians] ... swirls around it [what the Gospel is] these days”? Why or why not?

Answers will vary. But Gilbert is probably right, given the diversity of answers people tend to give with regards to what the gospel is, and given the sub- or contra-Biblical nature of their answers.

Why does this matter? Why is this problematic?

Because the gospel is the message of salvation. Understanding it properly, which is necessarily in order to believe it and trust in Jesus, is thus a matter of salvation.

2. As Gilbert asks on pp. 15, “How would you answer if someone asked you: What is this news that you Christians go on and on about?”

See Paul’s definition of the gospel in 1 Cor 15:3-4. Notes what he includes in this definition and what he emphasizes. E.g., ...

The historical events — Jesus’s death, burial, and resurrection. The gospel is not merely ideas; it’s an event. Salvation is not possible apart from these events. It’s Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection that save. So, if we miss these events, we are missing the Biblical message of salvation.

The saving significance of these events — “died *for our sins*” (v.3) – This implies the idea of bearing the penalty for sins (“for ... sins”) as our substitute or in our place (“our”); “by which you are being saved” (v.2). In other words, Paul wants us to understand not only the events (above), but also what the mean for accomplishing our salvation.

Paul centers his boiled down definition to the person of Jesus, his cross, and his resurrection, etc. These are the central features of the gospel message, in other words. As such, these should play a central role in our understanding of the gospel.

He mentions the saving response of faith – “received” (v.1); “in which you stand” (i.e., continue in, persevere in; v.1); “unless you *believed* in vain” (v.2). So, our response to the gospel (trust) is an important element for Paul.

3. Why is it important to get the gospel right? Why is it worth taking the time to study this matter?

See 1 Corinthians 15:1-4.

Note Paul’s language of “first importance” (v.3) when he describes the gospel. The gospel is the most important, foundational, central claim of Christianity (cf. Gal 1:6ff).

And this is because of its connection to our salvation (note the “being saved” language in v.2; cf. Rom 1:16). Inasmuch as salvation is important (incredibly so!), so the message of it (i.e., the gospel) is important.

See also Gilbert’s point – “I hope that reading this book will give you a deeper confidence as you talk to others about the good news of Jesus” (pp. 21). In other words, we need to get the gospel straight in our own minds, so that we can get the gospel right when sharing it with others.

Finally, if you are not a Christian, to investigate the Christian gospel is to investigate the central and most significant claims of Christianity. In its gospel, Christianity claims we are all in desperate need of salvation, but that this salvation has been accomplished by Christ. These are no light claims. If true, they are of utmost importance. Christianity is making quite serious claims here, to which any serious person would want to give serious reflection. Even if one doesn’t believe the claims, the stakes of the claims should at least give one pause and compel consideration. As such, they demand one’s diligent and honest consideration.

## CHAPTER 1 – FINDING THE GOSPEL IN THE BIBLE

**Meeting agenda:** To establish where we should go to know what this gospel is; and to survey the basic contours of that gospel?

### **Suggested questions and texts for discussion:**

1. Why is it important that we have the right source of information when we come to the question, What is the gospel?

Because otherwise we will be misled (cf. Gilbert’s GPS illustration).

And, to add to that, it is especially important in this case because we are not dealing with some light subject (like getting directions); we are dealing with matters of salvation and eternal destiny.

2. Many people go to sources of authority and information like tradition, reason, and experience. Why should we avoid holding them up as our ultimate authority in this matter—what is the gospel?

Note: these sources are not necessarily bad. They may provide us with much good supporting information and assistance. It’s just that they can’t hold the weight of being an ultimate authority.

Tradition – “Tradition leaves us relying on nothing more than the opinions of men” (pp. 25).

Reason – “Reason ... leaves us flailing about in skepticism” (pp. 25).

Experience – “[E]xperience leaves us relying on own fickle hearts in order to decide what is true—a prospect most honest people find unsettling at best” (pp. 25-26).

3. “Where do we go in order to know what is true, and therefore what the good news of Jesus Christ really is?” (pp. 26).

“As Christians, we believe that God has spoken to us in his Word, the Bible. Furthermore, we believe that what God has said in the Bible is infallibly and inerrantly true, and therefore it leads us not to skepticism or despair or uncertainty, but to confidence” (pp. 26).

Examine 2 Tim 3:14-17. Notice both (1) the trustworthy nature of scripture as God’s inspired word and (2) its content as that which reveals to us how we can be saved.

**Note:**

Gilbert takes the route of using Romans, in particular, to examine what the gospel is. This is because in the book of Romans Paul is presenting to us the gospel somewhat systematically (see Rom 1:16). As Gilbert says, “Perhaps more clearly than any other book of the Bible, Romans contains a deliberate, step-by-step expression of what Paul understood to be the good news” (pp. 27). Thus, if we want to know what the gospel is according to the Bible, this is as good as any place to look.

4. As Gilbert examines Romans 1-4, he finds that “Paul structures his presentation of the gospel around a few critical truths” (pp. 28). What are those four truths?

God – “*First, Paul tells his readers that it is God to whom they are accountable*” (pp. 28).

“[H]umanity is not autonomous. We did not create ourselves, and we are neither self-reliant nor self-accountable. No, it is God who created the world and everything in it, including us. Because he created us, God has the right to demand that we worship him. ... It is our obligation, as people created and owned by God, to give him the honor and glory that is due to him, to live and speak and act and think in a way that recognizes and acknowledges his authority over us. We are made by him, owned by him, dependent on him, and therefore accountable to him” (pp. 28; see Rom 1:18 and 1:21).

Man (or sin) – “*Second, Paul tells his readers that their problem is that they rebelled against God*” (pp. 29). See Rom 1:18-3:20 (e.g., 3:9).

Christ – “*Paul says that God’s solution to humanity’s sin is the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ*” (pp. 30). See Rom 3:21-26.

Response (faith) – “*Finally, Paul tells his readers how they themselves can be included in this salvation*” (pp. 31). See esp. Rom 3:22.

## CHAPTER 2 – GOD THE RIGHTEOUS CREATOR

**Meeting agenda:** To establish that, as our Creator, we are accountable to God for our sin, and that as a perfect, holy, and good judge, God punishes all sin.

### **Suggested questions and texts for discussion:**

1. Gilbert begins this chapter talking different (false) assumptions that people have about God (or, in this case, maybe better, *god*).

What are some of the false or less-than-true ideas that people have about God?

How do these misconceptions effect one's ability to come to grips with the gospel and understand one's need for salvation?

2. Gilbert says, "There are a few basic truths about God that a person *has* to understand in order to grasp what is going on in the good news of Christianity" (pp. 39-40).

In other words, apart from understanding certain things about God, the whole "Jesus dying to save us" isn't going to make a whole lot of sense. We won't really get the point of it – unless we first understand some fundamental things about God that reveal our need for salvation.

What are these things that one needs to know about God in order to understand the gospel, in order to make sense of Jesus having to die for our sins?

Gilbert identifies two primary things:

- (1) That God is Creator (and, thus, that we are accountable to him – will have to answer to him).
  - (2) And that he is holy and righteous (such that, when he holds us accountable, he holds us to the standard of perfection; he doesn't tolerate our sin).
3. "None of us is autonomous, and understanding that fact is key to understanding the gospel. ... We are created. We are made. And therefore we are owned. // Because he created us, God has the right to tell us how to live."

Look at the following texts and note what they say about our relationship to God because he is our creator:

Gen 1:26-28 – He made us exist (he created us); so he gets decide *why* we exist (our life purpose; how we should live).

Specifically, we have been appointed by God to be his servants, to be a reflection of his rule to the rest of creation and to each other.

This is what it means to be made in God's image, that we are to be an image, or reflection, of him to creation and those around us. He is the ruler, or

governor, of all creation. And as his image-bearing servants, we are to reflect his sort of gracious and just rule as we govern and care for this world and others.

Rev 4:11 – As the one who created all things, are things exist *for him*; they exist to give him glory (expose his awesomeness). This includes human beings; this is why we exists – our purpose.

Heb 4:13 – God sees all, and will hold all accountable.

Why is it important to understand this in order to “get” the gospel?

As Gilbert says, “Some understanding of this is absolutely necessary if a person wants to understand the good news of Christianity. The gospel is God’s response to the bad news of sin, and sin is a person’s rejection of God’s Creator-rights over him.”

#### 4. What do the following passages teach us about how God handles sin?

Ex 34:6-7 – God is 100% loving, forgiving, and compassionate. At the same time, he 100% judges sin – leaving none of it unpunished.

**Side note:** So how does he forgive us in the gospel? By dealing that punishment out to Christ on our behalf, in our place – for all those who trust in Jesus.

Hab 1:13 – In his goodness, God does not tolerate evil.

**Side note:** Some react to this sort of teaching about God – that he punishes sin and does not just “let it slide – but concluding that he is somehow (1) unreasonable or (2) bad, mean, and harsh

(1) Many think, how can God hold us to such a standard – perfection. “Doesn’t he know we aren’t perfect? He’s being unreasonable – holding us to a standard that he knows we cannot keep.” But it is not unreasonable for God to hold us to such a standard when, in the beginning, before we fell into sin, we were created to serve him perfectly.

(2) Some think that God’s punishment of sin paints him as a mean dude, almost as if *he* is the evil one. “He should just let it slide,” they might think. But a judge who let’s evil and corruption slide is not good. *He* is evil and corrupt. A good God puts an end to evil; he doesn’t tolerate it. We are just inconsistent here: We want God to tolerate *our* evil; but when it comes to evil outside of us (“out there”), we don’t want a God who doesn’t intervene and put an end to it or punish it.

James 2:10 – To violate one law, even if we think, “It’s no big deal; it’s just one violation,” is to become a law-violation, a criminal before God, and to be deserving of his punishment.

Why is it important to understand this in order to “get” the gospel?

Without an understanding that God punishes sin, we won't understand our need to be saved, i.e., from that punishment.

## CHAPTER 3 – MAN THE SINNER

**Meeting agenda:** To establish that humans are sinners liable to God’s judgment – sin being something that deserves God’s wrath.

### **Suggested questions and texts for discussion:**

#### 1. What is sin?

Disobedience of God’s commands, in any expression – words, thoughts, emotions, or actions. Sin is the rejection of God’s way in word, thought, or deed (See 1 John 3:4).

But sin is not only what we *do*. It’s also our condition, our nature, our state. We don’t just sin; we are *sinful*; we are *sinner*s. In fact, we sin *because* we are sinful (See Mt 15:19).

“The sinful words you speak and sinful actions you do are not just isolated incidents. They rise out of the evil of your own heart.” (Page 55)

Gilbert –

“Most people have no problem at all admitting that they’ve committed sins (plural), at least so long as they can think about those sins as isolated little mistakes in an otherwise pretty good life—a parking ticket here or there on an otherwise clean record.

Sins don’t shock us much. We know they are there, we see them in ourselves and others every day, and we’ve gotten pretty used to them. What is shocking to us is when God shows us the *sin* that runs to the very depths of our hearts, the deep-running deposits of filth and corruption that we never knew existed in us and that we ourselves could never expunge. That’s how the Bible talks about the depth and darkness of our sin—it is *in* us and *of* us, not just *on* us.” (Page 54)

**Note:** We are all sinners (see Rom 3:23; Eccl 7:20; 1 Kgs 8:46). This sin effects all of us.

#### 2. But why are we all sinners? How did we get here?

Answer: Adam.

But why does Adam’s sin make *me* a sinner? Why does Adam’s sin make us sinners?

Because God made/appointed as the representative of all humanity, such that, when he sinned, all of humanity fell into sin with him (see Rom 5:12-19).

Illustrations:

- Ambassador representing an entire nation.
- A team foul in basketball—one individual’s foul results in a penalization against his whole team. That player *represents* his team.

Thus, all are now sinners from birth (see Ps 51:5).

3. How serious do you think most people consider sin to be? Why is that?

Most people tend to blow off sin like it’s no big deal.

4. But why *is* sin so incredibly heinous?

Because sin is against God. It’s not a violation of an abstract law, some quite removed from God. Rather, because the law of God is an expression of the character of God, to violate the law is to attack God himself. And because God is our Creator and authority, sin is a personal affront to God himself.

Gilbert says,

“[M]ost people tend to think of sin, especially their own, as not much more than a parking infraction. . . . But according to the Bible, sin is a lot more than just the violation of some impersonal, arbitrary, heavenly traffic regulation. It’s the breaking of a relationship, and even more, it is a rejection of God himself—a repudiation of God’s rule, God’s care, God’s authority, and God’s right to command those to whom he gave life. In short, it is the rebellion of the creature against his Creator.” (Page 37-38)

Sometimes we talk about having a “broken relationship with God” apart from Christ. But Gilbert explains how this, in and of itself, could not capture the full picture:

“What we must remember, however, is that it was a specific *kind* of relationship in which they were to live—not the relationship between two equals, where law, judgment, and punishment are out of view, but the relationship between a King and his subjects.

Many Christians talk about sin as if it were merely a relational tiff between God and man, and what is needed is for us simply to apologize and accept God’s forgiveness. That image of sin as lovers’ quarrel, though, distorts the relationship in which we stand to God. It communicates that there is no broken law, no violated justice, no righteous wrath, no holy judgment—and therefore, ultimately, no need for a substitute to bear that judgment, either.

The Bible’s teaching is that sin is indeed a breaking of relationship with God, but that broken relationship consists in a rejection of his kingly majesty. It’s

not *just* adultery (though it is that); it is also rebellion. Not *just* betrayal, but also treason. If we reduce sin to a mere breaking of relationship, rather than understanding it as the traitorous rebellion of a beloved subject against his good and righteous King, we will never understand why the death of God's Son was required to address it." (Page 52)

5. So what is the consequence of sin? Why should we be worried?

The punishment for sin is death (spiritual and physical; Rom 6:23; cf. Gen 2:17<sup>1</sup>) and eternal damnation in hell (Mt 25:46).

Why? Recall chapter 2 where we saw that God punishes all sin.

**Summary:** All men are rebellious towards God, at enmity with God, condemned before God, and (without intervention) will be punished by God.

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that Adam and Eve didn't immediately *physically* die, even though God warned that they would "in the day that you eat of it," indicates that this death was both physical and spiritual. They died immediately spiritually.

## CHAPTER 4 – JESUS CHRIST THE SAVIOR

**Meeting agenda:** To consider how Christ achieves our salvation.

### **Suggested questions and texts for discussion:**

1. We talk about Jesus dying to save us. But why do we need saving? And what do we need to be saved from?

We need saving from our sin and its consequences, such as God’s judgment of our sin.

#### **Review:**

- We are accountable to God. He created us. He owns us. He is our judge.
- God is a good a just judge. And because of that, he judges sin (without exception).
- We (without exception) have sinned, and thus deserve his punishment.

2. Who is Jesus?

The answer to this question can include a lot of true things:

The important thing for our immediate consideration, though, is that Jesus is God’s appointed and sent Savior.

See Acts 4:12.  
Mt 1:21.  
Luke 10:19.  
1 Tim 1:15.  
1 John 4:14.  
Etc.

As C.S. Lewis pointed out, the one thing Jesus couldn’t be is just a good teacher (but nothing more).

“I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: “I’m ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don’t accept His claim to be God.” That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic-on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg-or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronising nonsense about His being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to.

We are faced, then, with a frightening alternative. This man we are talking about either was (and is) just what He said or else a lunatic, or something worse.”  
– C.S. Lewis

**Transition:** So if Jesus is who he said he was, than he is the Savior. But the Bible not only presents him as Savior. It presents him as fully God and fully man. In fact, it says that in order for him to be Savior, he needed to be fully God and fully man?

3. But why? Why is it an important fact that Jesus is fully God and fully man?

Fully man:

Jesus had to be human because we need someone to save humanity. The problem was *ours* (humanity’s). It was *our* sin, *our* death, and *our* punishment that needed to be dealt with. Jesus need to be human so he could take the place of humans and save them from their sin, death, and God’s punishment.

See Heb 2:14-17 – Jesus become a human being to take on humanity’s predicament (sin and death) and defeat it.

Rom 5:12-19 – Jesus becomes a human to become a new Adam. Whereas the original Adam lead humanity into sin and death, Jesus – the new Adam – becomes a human being to take on humanity’s sin and defeat it.

“In the same way, it is also critical that Jesus be truly one of us—that is, fully human—so that he can rightly represent us before his Father.” – Gilbert, pg. 62.

Fully God:

Only God – a divine human being – is able to accomplish our salvation.

“[I]t is only the fully human, fully divine Son of God who can save us. If Jesus were just another man—like us in every respect, including our fallenness and sin—he would no more be able to save us than one dead man can save another. But because he is the Son of God, without sin and equal in every divine perfection to God the Father, he is able to defeat death and save us from our sin.” – Gilbert, pg. 61-62.

4. What does Jesus do on the cross to save us? How does Jesus save us through his death?

There are many things that Jesus does for us on the cross; but on of the most central is that he takes our sin upon himself and suffers the punishment that we deserve. He becomes a substitute in taking our punishment (“penal substitution”; see Gilbert’s use of this term on page 65). And, thus, he achieves forgiveness.

In Jesus, even though we are guilty of sin and deserving of hell, we can be found innocent and righteous before God based on what Jesus has done.

See 2 Cor 5:21.

1 Peter 3:18.

Gal 3:13-14.

Isa 53:4-12.

5. So how can a holy and just God, who punishes sin without exception, grant us forgiveness?

Because Jesus takes the punishment that we deserved. As such, God rightly punishes our sin. But that punishment is met in Jesus. And thus God can forgive us without compromising his justice.

See Rom 3:26.

As the popular hymn, "Before the Throne," states,

"And God the just is satisfied  
To look on him and pardon me."

6. But not only did Jesus die. But he also rose again! What does his resurrection mean to us?

It means a lot of things to us (e.g., death is defeated and we have the hope of resurrection after the grave [see 1 Cor 15]; the fact that we have been raised with Christ means that we have spiritual life even now [Rom 6]).

But of particular importance here, Christ's resurrection demonstrates his victory over sin. Salvation has indeed been accomplished.

See 1 Cor 15:17.

## CHAPTER 5 – RESPONSE—FAITH AND REPENTANCE

**Meeting agenda:** To answer the question, “What must I do to be saved?” (Acts 16:30)

### **Suggested questions and texts for discussion:**

1. We have spoken of Christ’s death and resurrection as the gospel (good news). Through his death and resurrection, Jesus deals with sin and its consequences (e.g., God’s judgment).

This is good news in principle. But how does this become good news *for us*?

For example, when a winning lottery ticket exists, we might say this is “good news.” But it’s not good news *for me* unless I own that ticket.

So, again, with the gospel of Jesus Christ – How does the good news of his salvific work become good news for *me* (i.e., *my* salvation, and not just some salvation that exists “out there”)?

Trusting in Christ (faith) and repentance.

Mark 1:15; Eph 2:8-9; Acts 3:19.

2. What is faith? What does it mean to place one’s faith in Christ?

**Note:** Faith, belief, and trust are all from the same Greek word in the New Testament. They are not different concepts.

First, faith involves content – facts that we believe – namely who Jesus is (God; Savior) and what he has done (died and rose again to save us from sin)

See Romans 10:9, for example. Notice the content of *what* is believed.

Second, the nature of faith (or trust) is a willful reliance on Christ and His saving work alone for salvation.

Rom 4:4-5 (notice that faith is contrasted with working; we trust in Christ rather than our own work). Rom 4:18-21 (faith is described as “being fully convinced that God would do what he promised”).

**Note:** True faith in Christ is trusting in him *alone* for salvation. We are not really trusting in Christ to save us if, say for example, we are also trusting partially in our good works. Christ’s death testifies to us that we can’t save ourselves. (See Gal 2:21)

“Putting your faith in Christ means that you utterly renounce any other hope of being counted righteous before God. ... Faith means admitting that they are woefully insufficient, and trusting Christ alone.” (Gilbert, 79).

3. Why are we trusting Christ? What are we trusting Christ for?

Justification (Rom 3:21-26).

“If God is ever to count us righteous, he will have to do it on the basis of something other than our own sinful record. He’ll have to do it on the basis of someone *else’s* record, someone who is standing as a substitute for us. That’s where faith in Jesus comes in. When we put our faith in Jesus, we are relying on him to stand as our substitute before God, in both his perfect life and his penalty-paying death for us on the cross. In other words, we are trusting that God will substitute Jesus’ record for ours, and therefore declare us to be righteous (Rom. 3:22).” (Gilbert, 76)

#### 4. What is repentance?

A disposition change; a change of direction. Once you embraced sin without resistance. Now you turn from that, resolve to forsake sin, and embrace Jesus and the demands of following him.

See Mt 3:8 – notice, there are certain “fruit” that will be born out in becoming a Christ follower (cf. James 2:14-26).

**Note:** Repentance is the inseparable partner to faith. Faith and repentance, we might say, are two sides of the same coin. They belong together. And you can’t have one without the other. The absence of one dilutes the true nature of the other.

“Faith in Christ carries in itself a renunciation of that rival power that King Jesus conquered—sin. And where that renunciation of sin is not present, neither is genuine faith in the One who defeated it.” (Gilbert, 80)

#### 5. The Biblical calls us to place our faith in Jesus – to believe that he was not only a good teacher, a prophet, or someone with profitable ethics we should emulate, but the one and only Savior.

But what if we are undecided regarding this Jesus guy? What is we want to remain undecided or neutral? Is being neutral or undecided a legitimate option?

No. To refrain from deciding is a decision not to decide, which is a decision not to place one’s faith in Christ.

You may say, “But I am not outright *rejecting* Christ. I’m just remaining undecided or neutral. But not to place one’s faith in Christ is not a position of neutrality, but a place of unbelief. And not to belief is to be condemned.

See John 3:18 and 36.

We don’t have to *reject* Christ to be condemned. We are already condemned. Christ is the solution to this condemnation. Not to trust him is to reject this escape from condemnation.

#### 6. Where does baptism fit in here?

**Note:** Baptism is an outward expression that symbolizes our participation in the benefits of Jesus' death (buried into the water) and resurrection (and raised up from the water). It is a symbol that God gives us through which he says, "You have been buried and raised with Christ. You are saved by his death and resurrection." And if you are a believer, God's promises in baptism are yours.

See the symbolism of Romans 6 – buried and raised with Christ in baptism.

The Bible sees baptism as a rite that marks out who believers are. The Bible has no concept, therefore, of a Christian who does not get baptized. It's what Christians do – they associate themselves with Christ in this way. It's the tangible act God gives us to express our conversion – faith and repentance.

See Acts 2:41 (when they accepted the gospel, they were baptized).

#### 7. Where does church membership fit in here?

The Bible assumes that believers be apart of the community of the believers. This formal community is the church. The Bible has no category of a believer who is not part of the church. The Bible would say, "You're not a part of the believing community (the church). Then I suppose you must not be a believer."

See Acts 2:41 (when they accepted the gospel, they were added to the church).

**Note:** There are exceptions to this. But this is the normal. The exceptions are *exceptional* for a reason – they break the general pattern. This should not be seen as normal under normal circumstances.

**Summary:** The accomplished saving work of Christ is applied to all those who turn from sin and trust in Christ and his saving work (i.e., the gospel), a conversion expressed through baptism and inclusion among the ranks of God's people – the church.

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#### **"God-Man-Christ-Response" Summary:**

"We are accountable to the God who created us. We have sinned against that God and will be judged. *But* God has acted in Jesus Christ to save us, and we take hold of that salvation by repentance from sin and faith in Jesus." – Greg Gilbert.