

What is the gospel?

As you might have noticed, I'm a word-based person so if I get a new idea, I often try to search the Bible for related words. I know that my favourite words of late, 'Trinity' and 'relationship', occur never and once, respectively, in the NIV New Testament, but my latest word, 'gospel' or 'good news', occurs 123 times.

So today's question is what do we mean by the 'gospel/good news'? Or, more importantly, what does the Bible mean by the 'gospel'? How is it defined? I want Scripture to talk more than me:

Jesus told us to preach it:

Mark 16:15 [Jesus] said to them, "Go into all the world and **preach the good news to all creation.**"

Paul couldn't help but preach it:

1 Cor 9:6 Yet when I preach the gospel, I have no reason to boast, because I am obligated to preach. **Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!**

Paul knew it was powerful:

Rom 1:16 For I am not ashamed of **the gospel**, because it **is the power of God** that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile."

But Paul warned of the dire danger of getting it wrong:

Gal 1:8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should **preach a gospel contrary** to the one we preached to you, let him be under a **divine curse!**

Ouch!

OK, so Paul tells us that it's critically important to know: **What is the gospel?**

I guess we could agree that a definition of the gospel ought to include God being perfect and holy, us being sinful, God being loving and sending Jesus as a ransom; then if we repent and believe, we can come back to God and be saved and empowered by the Holy Spirit. OK?

We might differ on the detail, but I think we could all agree that something like that is the core. That is what we've all been taught, isn't it?! But there's a growing movement suggesting we've got it wrong [I can see your hackles rising from here!], and this is motivated by the fact that we're failing abysmally to grow disciples. What proportion of people who make a decision for Christ as children are still active Christians by the age of 30–35? One survey in the States suggested ~22%. Anecdotally that's true of 100% of my children, so I have a personal interest in this issue!

All of you who are reading this text have, like me, been Christians for years and years, and so you **know** what the gospel is, right? But are you willing to go back to the Bible, question what you have "always believed" and let the Holy Spirit change your mind?

If you are willing, then here's the first clue: Just under half the New Testament (46%) is made up of four books, each of which is called '**The Gospel according to...**'. Why did someone call each book 'the gospel'? Maybe it was because they thought that of it as actually being 'the gospel'?

What I outlined earlier as ‘the gospel’ might better be termed ‘the way of (personal) salvation’, and I’m suggesting that ‘the gospel’ that Jesus, Peter and Paul preached is simply the narrative of how Jesus was the fulfilment of the purposes of God revealed in the Old Testament.

Don’t worry, I’m not arguing that ‘the way of salvation’ is in any way untrue or unbiblical. I’m simply saying that if Paul says we’ll be accursed if we preach ‘another gospel’ then let’s be very sure we know what the Bible presents as ‘the gospel’.

A friend pointed me to two YouTube video talks. They are very theological, but because of the thinking and questioning I’ve been doing of late, I did at least understand some of what the speaker said, and I was very excited by how much of it reflected my recent thinking.

I’ll give you the links at the end, but in the meantime I’ll shut up and let Scripture speak. I did a word search on ‘the gospel’ and ‘the good news’, and I’ll just replay the verses I found – you can draw your own conclusions. Many of the quotes are similar, so you can skim over them.

I’ll list the scriptures as they occur, but first I’ll quote the only passage I know of where anyone (Paul) actually defines the gospel:

1 Cor 15 1. Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

The other exercise you could do would be to look at the places where Peter and Paul actually ‘preach the gospel’. And you can ask yourself how much of what I used to think of as ‘the gospel’ (i.e. the plan of salvation) is (or is NOT) included in what P+P cover in their preaching. Check out the seven sermons in Acts 2, 3, 10, 11, 13, 14 and 17.

So is it biblical to equate ‘preach the gospel’ with ‘preach the plan of salvation’? I don’t think it is, neither does the speaker:

My friend said:

I came across Scott McKnight on ‘**What is the Gospel?**’ when doing some cross referencing on **discipleship**. You will find him helpful, though long – but stick with it. He defines the Gospel after 41 min of the second talk.

This short version (18 mins) is a taster:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6pFH4fUCxZ4>

This is a fuller version (1h 18m):

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ECMQ0Fn6Q0k>

And I would add that unless you're very theological, do watch the short one first. Of the long one, the first 40–50 minutes contain the most helpful material. And it will help to know that 'soteriology' is the study of salvation.

I hope and pray that this will challenge you and help you grow in your relationship with the Lord and enable you in your ministry of growing disciples.

Paul Bev. 28.1.19

Matthew 4:23. Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.

Mt 9:35. Jesus went through all the towns and villages, teaching in their synagogues, preaching the good news of the kingdom and healing every disease and sickness.

Mt 11:5 The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

Mark 1:1. The beginning of the good news about Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Mk 1:14. After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 15 “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Mk 8:35 For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me and for the gospel will save it.

Mk 10:29 “I tell you the truth,” Jesus replied, “no-one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel 30 will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields – and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life.

Mk13:9 “You must be on your guard. You will be handed over to the local councils and flogged in the synagogues. On account of me you will stand before governors and kings as witnesses to them. 10 And the gospel must first be preached to all nations.

Mk 14:9 I tell you the truth, wherever the gospel is preached throughout the world, what she has done will also be told, in memory of her.”

Mark 16:15 He said to them, “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptised will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned.

Lk 3:18 And with many other words John exhorted the people and preached the good news to them.

Lk 4:43 But he said, “I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God to the other towns also, because that is why I was sent.”

Lk 7:22 So he replied to the messengers, “Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.

Luke 8:1. After this, Jesus travelled about from one town and village to another, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom of God. The Twelve were with him,

Lk 9:6 So they set out and went from village to village, preaching the gospel and healing people everywhere.

Lk 16:16 “The Law and the Prophets were proclaimed until John. Since that time, the good news of the kingdom of God is being preached, and everyone is forcing his way into it.

Luke 20:1. One day as he was teaching the people in the temple courts and preaching the gospel...

Acts 2:14. Then Peter stood up with the Eleven, raised his voice and addressed the crowd: “Fellow Jews and all of you who live in Jerusalem, let me explain this to you; listen carefully to what I say. 15 These men are not drunk, as you suppose. It’s only nine in the morning! 16 No, this is what was spoken by the prophet Joel: 17 ““In the last days, God says, I will pour out my Spirit on all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy, your young men will see visions, your old men will dream dreams. 18 Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy. 19 I will show wonders in the heaven above and signs on the earth below, blood and fire and billows of smoke. 20 The sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. 21 And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’

22 “Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. 23 This man was handed over to you by God’s set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. 24 But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him. 25 David said about him: ““I saw the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken. 26 Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices; my body also will live in hope, 27 because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay. 28 You have made known to me the paths of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence.’ 29 “Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. 30 But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. 31 Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay. 32 God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact. 33 Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear. 34 For David did not ascend to heaven, and yet he said, ““The Lord said to my Lord: ““Sit at my right hand 35 until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.” ‘ 36 “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.”

37. When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, “Brothers, what shall we do?” 38 Peter replied, “Repent and be baptised, 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. 39 The promise is for you and your children and for all who are far off – for all whom the Lord our God will call.”

Acts 5:41 The apostles left the Sanhedrin, rejoicing because they had been counted worthy of suffering disgrace for the Name. 42 Day after day, in the temple courts and from house to house, they never stopped teaching and proclaiming the good news that Jesus is the Christ.

Acts 8:12 But when they believed Philip as he preached the good news of the kingdom of God and the name of Jesus Christ, they were baptised, both men and women. ... 25 When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching

the gospel in many Samaritan villages. ... 35 Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus. ...40 Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

Acts 10:34. Then Peter began to speak: "I now realise how true it is that God does not show favouritism 35 but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right. 36 You know the message God sent to the people of Israel, telling the good news of peace through Jesus Christ, who is Lord of all. 37 You know what has happened throughout Judea, beginning in Galilee after the baptism that John preached- 38 how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil, because God was with him. 39 "We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree, 40 but God raised him from the dead on the third day and caused him to be seen. 41 He was not seen by all the people, but by witnesses whom God had already chosen by us who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. 42 He commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one whom God appointed as judge of the living and the dead. 43 All the prophets testify about him that everyone who believes in him receives forgiveness of sins through his name."

44. While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message. 45 The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles. 46 For they heard them speaking in tongues and praising God. Then Peter said, 47 "Can anyone keep these people from being baptised with water? They have received the Holy Spirit just as we have." 48 So he ordered that they be baptised in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked Peter to stay with them for a few days.

Acts 11:20 Some of them, however, men from Cyprus and Cyrene, went to Antioch and began to speak to Greeks also, telling them the good news about the Lord Jesus. 21 The Lord's hand was with them, and a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord.

Acts 13:26 "Brothers, children of Abraham, and you God-fearing Gentiles, it is to us that this message of salvation has been sent. 27 The people of Jerusalem and their rulers did not recognise Jesus, yet in condemning him they fulfilled the words of the prophets that are read every Sabbath. 28 Though they found no proper ground for a death sentence, they asked Pilate to have him executed. 29 When they had carried out all that was written about him, they took him down from the tree and laid him in a tomb. 30 But God raised him from the dead, 31 and for many days he was seen by those who had travelled with him from Galilee to Jerusalem. They are now his witnesses to our people. 32 "We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers 33 he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: "'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.' 34 The fact that God raised him from the dead, never to decay, is stated in these words: "'I will give you the holy and sure blessings promised to David.' 35 So it is stated elsewhere: "'You will not let your Holy One see decay.' 36 "For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. 37 But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay. 38 "Therefore, my brothers, I want you to know that through Jesus the forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you. 39 Through him everyone who believes is justified from everything you could not be justified from by the law of Moses. 40 Take care that what the prophets have said does not happen to you: 41 "'Look, you scoffers, wonder and perish, for I am going to do something in your days that you would never believe, even if someone told you.'"

Acts 14:6 But they found out about it and fled to the Lycaonian cities of Lystra and Derbe and to the surrounding country, 7 where they continued to preach the good news.

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21 They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, 22 strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.

Acts 15:7 After much discussion, Peter got up and addressed them: “Brothers, you know that some time ago God made a choice among you that the Gentiles might hear from my lips the message of the gospel and believe. 8 God, who knows the heart, showed that he accepted them by giving the Holy Spirit to them, just as he did to us. 9 He made no distinction between us and them, for he purified their hearts by faith. 10 Now then, why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear? 11 No! We believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus that we are saved, just as they are.”

Acts 16:10 After Paul had seen the vision, we got ready at once to leave for Macedonia, concluding that God had called us to preach the gospel to them.

Acts 17:18 A group of Epicurean and Stoic philosophers began to dispute with him. Some of them asked, “What is this babbler trying to say?” Others remarked, “He seems to be advocating foreign gods.” They said this because Paul was preaching the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.

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22. Paul then stood up in the meeting of the Areopagus and said: “Men of Athens! I see that in every way you are very religious. 23 For as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: TO AN UNKNOWN GOD. Now what you worship as something unknown I am going to proclaim to you.

24 “The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands. 25 And he is not served by human hands, as if he needed anything, because he himself gives all men life and breath and everything else. 26 From one man he made every nation of men, that they should inhabit the whole earth; and he determined the times set for them and the exact places where they should live. 27 God did this so that men would seek him and perhaps reach out for him and find him, though he is not far from each one of us. 28 ‘For in him we live and move and have our being.’ As some of your own poets have said, ‘We are his offspring.’

29 “Therefore since we are God’s offspring, we should not think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone – an image made by man’s design and skill. 30 In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent. 31 For he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. He has given proof of this to all men by raising him from the dead.”

Acts 20:24 However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me – the task of testifying to the gospel of God’s grace.

Romans 1:1. Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God- 2 the gospel he promised beforehand through his prophets in the Holy Scriptures 3 regarding his Son, who as to his human nature was a descendant of David, 4 and who through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God, by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord. ... 9 God, whom I serve with my whole heart in preaching the gospel of his Son, is my witness how constantly I remember you 10 in my prayers at all times; ... 15 That is why I am so eager to preach the gospel also to you who are at Rome.

16. I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes: first for the Jew, then for the Gentile. 17 For in the gospel a righteousness from God is revealed, a righteousness that is by faith from first to last, just as it is written: “The righteous will live by faith.”

Romans 10:16 But not all the Israelites accepted the good news. For Isaiah says, “Lord, who has believed our message?”

1 Cor 1:17. Therefore I glory in Christ Jesus in my service to God. 18 I will not venture to speak of anything except what Christ has accomplished through me in leading the Gentiles to obey God by what I have said and done- 19 by the power of signs and miracles, through the power of the Spirit. So from Jerusalem all the way around to Illyricum, I have fully proclaimed the gospel of Christ. 20 It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else’s foundation.

1 Cor 9:16 Yet when I preach the gospel, I cannot boast, for I am compelled to preach. Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!

1 Cor 15:1. Now, brothers, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Peter, and then to the Twelve. 6 After that, he appeared to more than five hundred of the brothers at the same time, most of whom are still living, though some have fallen asleep. 7 Then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles, 8 and last of all he appeared to me also, as to one abnormally born.

2 Cor 4:4 The god of this age has blinded the minds of unbelievers, so that they cannot see the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.

Gal 1:6. I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel- 7 which is really no gospel at all. Evidently some people are throwing you into confusion and are trying to pervert the gospel of Christ. 8 But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!

... 10. Am I now trying to win the approval of men, or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I were still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of Christ. 11 I want you to know, brothers, that the gospel I preached is not something that man made up. 12 I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it; rather, I received it by revelation from Jesus Christ.

Gal 3:8 The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: "All nations will be blessed through you." 9 So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.

2 Tim 1:9 This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, 10 but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Saviour, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel. 11 And of this gospel I was appointed a herald and an apostle and a teacher.

Heb 4:2 For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith [because they did not share in the faith of those who obeyed]. ... 6 It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience.