

Bible Basics

What is the Gospel?

The word 'gospel' is the English translation of the Greek word 'evangelion', meaning good news. The word is found in the New Testament books of Matthew, Mark, Acts and in Paul's letters to the Corinthians and Romans. The word is also used to describe the first four books of the New Testament, the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four books focus on Jesus Christ and record events in his life; his teachings, the actions and miracles he performed and his crucifixion and resurrection. Mark's and Luke's gospels were written for unbelievers while Matthew's and John's gospels were written specifically to Jewish believers.

Jesus told his followers to preach the Gospel throughout the world (Matthew 24:14, 26:13, Mark 13:10, 16:15) with the expectation of giving their lives for this task (Mark 8:35). They were to preach the good news, or more accurately, great news! So, it could be asked, what specifically did Jesus mean when he spoke of the Gospel and what good news did Jesus' disciples preach? Did the disciples preach a lengthy recitation of everything Jesus has said and done?

The word Gospel was never limited to use in a religious context. When the messenger *Philippides* ran the 26 miles from Marathon to Athens in 490 BC, he proclaimed the gospel to the Athenians. He announced the good news of the Greek victory over the Persians, then died of exhaustion. The Gospel of Jesus Christ tells of another victory, an even greater victory than that which *Philippides* announced, for the Gospel of Jesus Christ tells of a victory that has not been diminished by time, yet what message are we to share?

Listed below are four responses Christians have given to the question, what is the Gospel? These responses include:

- *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life."* John 3:16
- *"Christ died for our sins according to the scriptures."* 1 Corinthians 15:3
- **A question.** *"Can we summarise the Gospel in a few words?"*
- **"GRACE - God's Riches At Christ's Expense"**

While these responses are certainly thoughtful and reflect at least a part of the good news, do they capture the essence of what the Gospel is or reflect, or even match the passion and conviction of the good news which *Philippides* declared?

We should remember that Jesus was not the first to preach the gospel. The prophets had spoken to the Israelites for centuries, reminding them that God had not abandoned them. The prophets spoke of a future restoration of God's kingdom and the resurrection of "dry bones" and of a saviour to come.

Jesus continued this prophetic tradition and preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God; *"The time is fulfilled," He said, "and the kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe in the **gospel!**"* (Mark 1:14 - 15)

When Jesus read the words of the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue, he was repeating and confirming the good news.

*"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim **good news** to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."* (Isaiah 61:1-2), Luke 4:18-19)

Jesus confirmed the good news to the Jews but they rejected Jesus as the one who would fulfil their hopes. After Jesus read the words of the prophet Isaiah, he sat down in the synagogue (possibly in the seat reserved for Moses), and declared the scriptures to be fulfilled (Luke 4:20-21). It was then that the Jews tried to kill him.

When Jesus preached the Gospel to the Jews, he preached the good news of the Kingdom of God to audiences that knew and understood the scriptures. The Jews were waiting for a saviour and a king to lead them however, audiences today do not necessarily know the scriptures or live with the expectation of a saviour to save them or even feel they need one. Many today believe their own righteous is sufficient for a God they do not know.

However, mankind's needs have not changed. While we work for the necessities of life, these do not preserve life indefinitely. We need life itself, the gift of eternal life that only God can give. We fear death because we lack the assurance of life, the assurance that only the knowledge of Jesus' death and resurrection can give. It is only believers who have the assurance of life because of Christ's victory over death. The Jews rejected Jesus because they wanted a saviour who would free them from the Roman oppression, but in doing so they rejected the only one who can give them life. Choosing Barabbas instead of Jesus was a poor choice.

Audiences today need to hear the Gospel, even audiences that do not know the scriptures, or are well fed and have sufficient, need to hear the Gospel. None of us can be confident in our own works or in any gifts we have received through our birth. All of us need to hear the Gospel proclaimed and be born again. We need to hear the same Gospel that Jesus' first disciples preached, but what did they preach?

Jesus gave his twelve disciples the power and authority to cast out demons and heal all diseases and sent them out to tell the people the good news of the Kingdom of God and heal the sick (Luke 9:1-6, Matthew 10:1, Mark 6:7). After this, Jesus appointed seventy others and sent them ahead to into every town he planned to visit (Luke 10:1). However, after Jesus death and resurrection, the message the disciples preached changed. It was no longer *"We have found the anointed one!"* (John 1:41) or *"Come and see"* (John 1:45). When the disciples found the empty tomb and discovered that Jesus was alive, they ran to tell the others, preaching the good news that:

"Jesus Christ is alive!" "He is Risen!"

The risen Christ is the message the disciples preached, and this is the message that continues to be preached throughout the world. It was the news that made the two disciples race back along the road from Emmaus to share with the apostles. It is the good news of the greatest victory. It is the news of Jesus' victory over death and the news that gives us assurance of a life to come.

The apostle Paul wrote, Jesus's resurrection is central to our faith. Paul wrote to the Romans, *"if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved."* Romans 10:9

Paul wrote to the people of Corinth. *"Now if Christ is preached, that he has been raised from the dead, how do some among you say that there is no resurrection of the dead? But if there is no resurrection of the dead, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is vain, your faith also is vain. Moreover, we are even found to be false witnesses of God, because we witnessed against God that he raised Christ, whom he did not raise, if in fact the dead are not raised. For if the dead are not raised, not even Christ has been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins. Then those also who have fallen asleep in Christ have perished. If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied"* (1 Corinthians 15:12-19).

It was this news that caused a great reaction among the Jews.

"They were greatly disturbed because the apostles were teaching the people and proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection of the dead" (Acts 4:2).

Jesus had told his disciples that their grief would turn to joy (John 16:19-24) and the good news that Jesus was alive did bring them great joy to those who loved him. Their brother, friend, teacher, Lord and son was alive. The disciples' trust and faith in Jesus was justified, but they were not celebrating for their own validation, they celebrated Jesus rising from the grave because they loved him. Jesus is our advocate before God, he is our high priest, our King. We live because Jesus lives. "He is risen!" He died for our sins so that we can approach the unseen God, justified by our faith (Romans 5:1). He died for sins past and present but not for the sin of our unbelief. We still need to believe, to repent and be born again. Jesus is the first born of the dead, the first man to die and be raised to God. Jesus faced judgement and lives. In him is our hope. In the living Christ is everlasting life. Jesus' resurrection is an historical event. The risen Jesus was seen by Peter and the apostles and more than 500 witnesses at the same time and later on the road to Damascus by Paul himself (1 Corinthians 15:6-7). Jesus' resurrection proved beyond doubt that Jesus' teachings were true. He was the Messiah, the anointed Son of God. However, we are not to simply remember this past historical event. Jesus said if you love me, obey my commands.

In response to the previous answers to the question: what is the Gospel?

- John 3:16 is certainly a well-known Bible verse and it is often treated as a summary of the Gospel, but it might best be described as a statement of belief. John wrote this verse as a believer, writing to other believers who had already heard and believed the Gospel message.
- Similarly, the Gospel is not; 'Christ died for our sins'. While Paul told the Corinthians, *"For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures"* (1 Corinthians 15:3), ultimately, it is not in his death that we are saved, but in the living Christ that we find our salvation. It is through his death that our sins are forgiven, but it is only in the living Christ do we gain ever lasting life. Again, the context of this verse is Paul speaking to believers who had already heard the good news, the great news that Jesus is alive.
- Can summarise the Gospel? If we cannot summarise, then do we really understand it?
- It is through God's grace that we are saved, and not through our own righteousness or our own works. But when we attempt to abstract the Gospel, are we not beginning to distance ourselves from it and in danger of becoming lukewarm to the message?

What do Believers Believe?

Many Christians believe that Jesus is God, but let's read the Bible and see if that is a true definition of Belief.

The Jews believed in one God, they believed in angels and demons, in heaven and hell, in judgement and in a resurrection. They believed in the prophets and their scriptures, but they were not called "Believers". The term believers was used by Jesus' followers to distinguish themselves from other Jews who had rejected Jesus as the Messiah.

- Jesus said, *'If you can believe, all things are possible to him who **believes.**'* Mark 9:23.
- *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever **believes** in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever **believes** in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already because they have **not believed** in the name of God's one and only Son."* John 3:16-18
- Jesus said to her, *"Did I not tell you that if you **believed** you would see the glory of God?"* John 11:40
- *"But to all who did receive him, who **believed** in his name, he gave the right to become children of God,"* John 1:12
- Jesus said to him, *"Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have **believed.**"* John 20:29
- Jesus said: *"Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever **believes in me** will also do the works that I do; and greater works than these will he do, because I am going to the Father. Whatever you ask in my name, this I will do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If you ask me anything in my name, I will do it.* John 14:12-14
- *"Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; **believe also in me.**"* John 4:1
- *"Because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and **believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead,** you will be saved. For with the heart one believes and is justified, and with the mouth one confesses and is saved."* Romans 10:9-10
- *"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
- *"And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. Whoever **believes** and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned."* Mark 16:15-16
- *Immediately the father of the child cried out and said, "**I believe; help my unbelief!**"* Mark 9:24

- *But these are written, that ye might **believe** that Jesus is the Christ, **the Son of God**; and that believing ye might have life through his name. John 20:31*

The term “*Believer*” is found in the Bible and the Quran and there is no difference in its usage or definition. The Quran confirms that Jesus is Messiah and reminds us that the previous scriptures are true. The Quran says two things about the son of God. It explains that Jesus was not the Son of God because he was adopted by God. The Quran also tells us that the term “Son of God” does not mean that Jesus was begotten as another God.

In the first three centuries after Jesus’ death and resurrection, various Christian denominations created their own doctrines, such as the false teaching that Jesus was both the son of God and God. These false teachings have persisted in many churches and continue to cause division amongst believers. Those who did not accept the new definition of Belief were labelled heretics. When Mohammad preached that Jesus was not both God and the son of God, he too was called a heretic.

The gospels state that Jesus is the Christ, **the Son of God**; and that believing ye might have life through his name (John 20:31). We cannot change what the gospels tell us to believe. We cannot add to these words or take away from them. We cannot reinterpret what we are to believe or ignore these words. While various Christian denominations and Muslim authorities have added new doctrines and attempted to redefine the meaning of Belief over the centuries, God’s word has not changed.

Belief is not simply an intellectual understanding; belief requires an action. If we believe that Jesus is the Messiah, then we should obey him for he is our king and lord. John 3:36 stresses that without obedience, Believers will not be saved from God’s wrath. Hebrews 5:9 tells us that Jesus is the author of eternal salvation to all who obey him. Surah 3, Verse 50 tells us to fear God and obey Jesus.

Conclusion

Believers celebrated with joy when they found that Jesus was alive. It is this event that brought them great joy and made them run to tell the other disciples. Our faith stands on the truth of Jesus' resurrection, Christ suffered and died but death could not hold him. Jesus did not die but lives, winning a great victory over death. It is this truth that Jesus disciples first preached, and it remains the essence of the Gospel we are to proclaim today.

Yes, Jesus did die for our sins, but it is in the living Christ that we stand righteous and forgiven before God. In the living Christ we too become children of God. Not servants, but heirs to the Kingdom of God.

On the Last Day, we too will rise from the grave with new bodies and live with Christ in the new Heaven and new Earth.

Death and suffering of this world are meaningless to the glory that awaits those who Believe.

What is the Gospel? What do we Believe? Two questions fundamental to our understanding of God and to the lives we live. The Old and New Testaments and the Quran all remind us of the good news. They all also help to show that Jesus is the Messiah. The gospels were written so that we would believe Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah, who conquered death and lives.

As the Quran repeatedly tells us, we are to fear God and Obey Jesus!