

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 letter to the Romans, but the term Gospel is also used as a descriptive label for the first four books of the New Testament; the gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John. These four books focus on Jesus Christ. The Gospels record events of Jesus' 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.

The term gospel is used quite broadly, but the Gospel is mentioned specifically as 'the Gospel'. Jesus told his followers to preach the Gospel throughout the world (Matthew 24:14, 26:13, Mark 13:10, 16:15) with the expectation that they are to even give their lives for this task (Mark 8:35). So, it could be asked, what is the specific meaning of the Gospel and what good news did Jesus' disciples preach?

We know the word gospel means good news, or more accurately, great news! Jesus instructed his followers to go out into the world and tell all people the Gospel, but what message was preached? Did Jesus' disciples preach a lengthy recitation of everything Jesus has said and done?

The word Gospel was never limited to any 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, a much more significant victory than that which *Philippides* announced, for the Gospel of Jesus Christ tells of a victory that has not been diminished by time, yet do we even know what message we are 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"**

These responses are certainly thoughtful and reflect at least a part of the good news, but do they capture the essence of what the Gospel 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 Israelites were told by the prophets that God had not abandoned them. The prophets had spoken of the future restoration and the healing of Israel. They gave hope of the resurrection of "dry bones" and of a saviour to come.

Jesus continued this prophetic tradition. He 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)

The Jews heard the good news but rejected Jesus as the one who would fulfil their hopes. After Jesus read the words of the prophet Isaiah, he sat down (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.

The Gospel we teach, must be the same Gospel that Jesus first disciples preached, but different audiences have different expectations and different needs. Jesus preached the gospel to audiences that largely knew and understood the scriptures, but they were wanting a saviour to free them from the Roman oppression. Audiences today are not all expecting a saviour or even feel they need one. Many today believe their own righteousness is sufficient for a God they do not know. So, what is the message that all audiences need to hear, even those who are well fed and have sufficient and are confident in their own works?

The Gospel that Jesus' first disciples preached is the same we need to hear today, which is, the climax of the Gospel story. It is the Gospel that changed Jesus' first followers and made them run. The disciples began to preach the good news when they found the empty tomb. The news the first disciples continued to preach throughout the world.

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

The resurrection is where we should begin the Gospel message; this is the news that made the two disciples race back along the road from Emmaus to share with the apostles. It is the news of the greatest victory. The victory of life over death.

As the apostle Paul has written, 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).

Jesus' resurrection is the Good News the first disciples preached and the news that caused the greatest 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).

In response to the previous answers to the question, what is the Gospel.

- John 3:16 certainly *one of* the most well-known of all Bible verses and it is often treated as a summary of the Gospel, but it is not the Gospel. It is best described as a statement of belief. It was written by a believer to believers. It does not emphasize that Jesus lives, nor does it speak of repentance. Jesus did not preach the love of God to unbelievers. The beginning of wisdom is the fear of God (Proverbs 1:7, 9:10, Job 28:28, Psalm 111:10). Jesus preached repentance. Repent and believe. John wrote this verse as a believer, writing to other believers who had already heard the Gospel message.
- Similarly, the Gospel message is not; *'Christ died for our sins'*. While Paul did tell 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. Our death or even Jesus' death does not give us any entitlement. It is through his death our sins are forgiven, but it is only in the living Christ do we gain ever lasting life. The context of this verse is within the Great news that Jesus is alive.
- Yes, we can summarise the Gospel. If we cannot summarise, then do we really understand it?
- We are not saved through our own righteousness or our own works but through God's grace. But when we attempt to abstract the Gospel, we begin to distance ourselves from it and are in danger of becoming lukewarm to the message.

The good news of the Gospel is the great joy found in his resurrection. We live because Jesus lives. "He is risen!" Jesus Christ did not die in our place. 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.

Jesus is the first born of the dead, the first man to die and be raised by God. Jesus faced judgement and lives. In him is our hope. In the living Christ is ever lasting 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 was the Messiah, the anointed Son of God.

However, we are not to simply remember this past historical event, belief requires obedience.

What do Believers Believe?

Many in the churches may say that Christians believe that Jesus is God, but let's read the Bible and see if that is the true definition of Belief?

The Jews believed in one God, they believed in angels and demons, in heaven and hell, in judgement and resurrection, in the prophets and their scriptures but they were not called "Believers" by Jesus' followers because they had rejected Jesus.

- 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 description of ‘*Believer*’ was first used by the early Christians to differentiate themselves from other Jews who did not believe that Jesus was the Messiah and the Son of God. The term “*Believer*” is found in the Bible and the Quran and there is no difference in its usage or definition.

The Quran actually confirms that Jesus is Messiah and attempts to correct false teachings. 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 and tells us that the description “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 redefined the meaning of belief, saying Jesus was both the son of God and God. These attempts to alter the teachings of the church has caused great division amongst believers. Those who did not accept the new definition of Belief were labelled heretics and 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 Christian churches and Muslim authorities have added new doctrines and attempted to redefine or improve the definition of Belief over the centuries, God’s word has not changed.

Belief is not simply an intellectual understanding, but 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 did not remain in the grave but was raised to life. It is this event that believers first preached, and this remains the Gospel we proclaim today. Christ suffered death but did not die. He won a great victory over death.

But wait there is more! He died so that we could live. He died for our sins so that we too can stand righteous and forgiven before God.

But there is more!

Through his death we too become children of God. Not servants but heirs to the Kingdom of God.

And there is still more!

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 us that Jesus is the Messiah. The gospels were written to believers and nonbelievers, telling us to believe that Jesus is the Son of God, the Messiah who lives. Fear God and Obey Jesus!