

CHAPTER ONE

THE BEST NEWS EVER AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOU



We never “get beyond the gospel” to something more advanced.

*The gospel is not the first step in a stairway of truths;
rather, it is more like the hub in a wheel of truth.*

The gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of Christianity.

TIMOTHY KELLER, *THE CENTRALITY OF THE GOSPEL*

The one thing the gospel never does is nothing.

RAY ORTLUND JR., *THE GOSPEL*

Lola was a slave.

She grew up in a poor family in a rural part of the Philippines. She was penniless, unschooled, and gullible. Her parents wanted her to marry a pig farmer twice her age, but she was unhappy at the prospect. When a lieutenant approached her with an offer,

she couldn't resist: she could have food and shelter if she would commit to taking care of his young daughter.

Lola agreed. She had no idea she had signed up to become a slave for life.

Lola lived with that daughter, and eventually her children and grandchildren, for fifty-six years, both in the Philippines and America. She raised children. She cooked and cleaned from dawn to dark. She was tongue-lashed and beaten, wore used clothing, and ate scraps and leftovers by herself in the kitchen. She slept anywhere she could find a spot: on couches, in storage areas, in corners, or on piles of laundry.

As Alex, the son of the family that enslaved Lola, grew up he began to understand that Lola was a slave. As a young adult, he gave her an ATM card linked to his account and taught her how to use it. He tried to teach her how to drive.

Later he invited Lola to live with him and his family. He gave her a bedroom and permission to do whatever she wanted: sleep in, watch TV, or do nothing all day. "She could relax—and be free—for the first time in her life. I should have known it wouldn't be that simple," he writes in a recent article for *The Atlantic*. He sat her down. "This is your house now . . . you're not here to serve us. You can relax, okay?"

"Okay," she said. And went back to cleaning. She didn't know how *not* to be a slave.

One day he came home and found Lola sitting on the couch with her feet up, doing a word puzzle and watching TV, with a cup of tea beside her. She looked up sheepishly. "Progress," he thought.¹

Lola had been a slave for so long that she struggled to embrace freedom when it was offered her. She spent the last years of her life with only a fleeting understanding that she was free and loved.

In a similar way, many of us find it difficult to accept our freedom in Christ. The Bible says that we—all of us—have lived as

slaves to sin (John 8:34; Rom. 6:20). We're so used to it that we struggle to understand that, in Jesus, we're no longer slaves. We'll spend the rest of our lives trying to live in light of two truths we find hard to grasp: in Jesus we're free and we're loved.

WHAT IS THE GOSPEL?

A Christian leader once argued that we should take the next ten years off so that we could define the gospel.

He was right and he was wrong. We do need to define the gospel. There's nothing more important than understanding, at the deepest levels of our souls, the truth of what God has done for us in Jesus. The gospel is both simple and complex. A small child can understand it—sometimes better than we can—but the most advanced theologian will never be able to sound its deepest depths.

Yet we can't wait ten years to define the gospel. We need the gospel *now*. We can no sooner take ten years to define the gospel than we could take a ten-year break from breathing. The gospel is the desperate need of the world and of every human heart. It's of first importance. Our churches need it. We need it if we have any hope of becoming who we were meant to be, because the gospel is the key to spiritual growth.

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So what is the gospel? The gospel is set within a larger story of a good world that's gone bad because of human sin. Unless we understand the larger story, it's impossible to understand the gospel itself. The Bible tells one unified story that explains our world, and the centerpiece of that story is the gospel.

God created all things good, including us, but we rebelled against Him. We see evidence of the brokenness of the world all around us: wars, violence, injustice, inequity, relational breakdown, natural disasters, sickness, death, and more. The world is broken

beyond our ability to fix it. Not only is the world broken, but so are we. But God didn't create the world like this. We've contaminated the world through our treason against a good and holy God.

We made such a mess of this world that God would have been justified in writing us off. He would be right to judge us and be done with us. But instead, God chose to rescue us. God—one God who is three persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—conspired together to save us. The Father sent His Son, Jesus, to become one of us. Instead of destroying the world, He entered it. When Jesus was born, He became the first person in history to live without rebelling against God. His obedience was perfect. Jesus also gave us a taste of life the way it should be. He healed the sick, served outcasts, and confronted injustice. The miracles He performed foreshadowed the day when God will restore the world to the way it should be.

But that's not even the best part. Although Jesus was the first truly innocent person to ever live, He took our place and died as payment for sins we committed. He repeatedly emphasized that this is why He came. He not only entered the world filled with people who deserved to be judged, but He took that judgment on Himself so we don't have to. And by doing this, He restored us to relationship with our heavenly Father.

To everyone's surprise, Jesus' followers found His grave empty three days after He'd been killed. Over five hundred people saw Him alive before He ascended to heaven. His resurrection proved that what He said was true. It vindicated Him. It also shows us that we can trust Him, and it gives a preview of what will happen to those who follow Him.

One day Jesus will return and judge all of us, and then He'll completely renew our world. Those who have trusted Jesus will enjoy the world as it was meant to be, in perfect relationship with God and others.

But now, God calls for our response. God invites us to come to Him in surrender, admitting our need. God calls us to admit the truth about ourselves, to turn away from our sins, and follow Him in faith and trust. There's only one way out of the mess we find ourselves in, and that's through Jesus. We've been found guilty, but Jesus has already paid the penalty for those who put their trust in Him. If we cling to our own efforts to pay that penalty, we'll miss out on what Jesus has done and face the penalty ourselves—a penalty that's more than we can ever pay. We *must* take advantage of the gospel. It's our only hope.

Until Jesus comes back, the church's role is to show and tell the story of the gospel. The gospel motivates us, guides us, and empowers us. It calls for a response. Once we respond with genuine repentance and faith, the gospel changes everything.

Whew. That's a lot, yet it's barely scratching the surface of what the gospel means. To simplify it a bit more, the gospel can be summarized by understanding three truths:

- **God is holy.**
- **Humanity is sinful.**
- **God is rescuing His people and creation through the perfect work of Jesus Christ.**

These truths set everything right. They not only show us the way to be right with God, but they also show us the way to live. The best news of all is that God's rescue is completely based on grace. We don't earn any of it. We don't deserve it. But it's ours, given to us freely by God.

That's the best news ever. Paul, a former enemy of Jesus who became one of His most passionate followers, wrote that we stand in this gospel, and that we're being saved by it. "For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried,

that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor. 15:3–4). It’s the very power of God, and the greatest truth known by humanity, yet we often treat it like it doesn’t matter. The apostle Paul observed this tendency even in the first century, writing to the Galatian believers: “I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting him who called you in the grace of Christ and are turning to a different gospel—not that there is another one” (Gal. 1:6–7). This has been our story ever since.

It’s time to rediscover the good news that has the power to change our lives forever.

WHAT THIS MEANS FOR YOU

Because the work of Jesus is the climactic event of history and the transformative truth in our lives, we can look to it in every aspect of our lives. In fact, most of the New Testament is spent unpacking how it applies to every part of life. Simply open to any New Testament passage to discover an aspect of the gospel being applied to real life.

While there’s no way I can tease out all the implications of this amazing news, I’d like to highlight a few things that are true in your life if you have trusted Jesus.

1. You’re Free from Guilt and Shame

Most of us are familiar with *shame*: the internal sense that we don’t measure up and that we’re not okay. It’s an emotional weapon Satan uses to corrupt our relationships with God and each other, and to disintegrate our vocational vision and creativity.² Brené Brown’s TED talk on the subject has been viewed over 34 million times,³ and her books on vulnerability and imperfection are bestsellers.

We also experience *guilt*: the objective sense that we haven’t

met an external standard. Although widespread acceptance of religion seems to be declining, we still seem to struggle with guilt. According to professor Wilfred M. McClay, “Guilt has not merely lingered. It has grown, even metastasized, into an ever more powerful and pervasive element in the life of the contemporary West.”⁴ Yet we still don’t know what to do with it.

The gospel provides the remedy we need. For those who trust Jesus, every wrong done and every good left undone—past, present, and future—has been dealt with at the cross. Jesus has made full payment, so that when God looks at us He sees the perfect righteousness of Jesus. The Bible offers this shocking declaration: “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 8:1). We are free from sin, guilt, and shame.

One of my favorite stories in the Bible is found in Zechariah 3. Zechariah has a vision of Joshua, the high priest, standing in God’s presence. It was the Day of Atonement, which means that Joshua would have spent days preparing himself so that he could be pure before God. In Zechariah’s vision, though, Joshua stood before God with dirty clothes. The language that Zechariah uses is explicit: he was covered in excrement. To make it worse, Satan was also present and accusing Joshua of his failings.

That’s a pretty good picture of how the best of us measure up before God. My friend Brian Bakke regularly sweeps the streets where he lives to remind himself of how we measure up before God. He writes:

I clean the block each morning. And as I gather up the drug bags, dog crap, food garbage, butts, and bottles, I think this is how I look before a pure and holy God on my best day. I am covered in my own filth as I stand before the Almighty. And as I put my hands in filth I am reminded [that] God left Heaven and came

to live in our filth. And He redeemed it. In this way He calls me to be an act of redemption on my street and redeem the places where people dump trash. Where they seek to kill themselves or others. And to get in the way. The entire time I am asking God to forgive our fathers for the sins that created this neighborhood and city, and then ask God to bless the saints who live here, that we can be salt and light. And take back from Satan the land he stole from Jesus.⁵

We need the gospel. We're hopeless before God without it. In Zechariah's vision, God told Satan to shut up. He took away Joshua's filthy clothes and reclothed him like royalty. This demonstrates what God does for each one of us when we come to Him.

When we feel guilt, shame, or regret, we can remember that God has silenced our accuser, removed our guilt, and reclothed us with His righteousness. He has decisively dealt with our sins—not just some of them, but all of them. Martin Luther, a priest who struggled with guilt more than five hundred years ago, discovered the gospel's power in dealing with sin and offers advice that still holds true today:

When the devil throws our sins up to us and declares that we deserve death and hell, we ought to speak thus: "I admit that I deserve death and hell. What of it? Does this mean that I shall be sentenced to eternal damnation? By no means. For I know One who suffered and made satisfaction in my behalf. His name is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Where he is, there I shall be also."⁶

The gospel removes all condemnation from your life. We'll still encounter guilt and shame as long as we live, but we can keep turning to the gospel to remind ourselves that in Jesus we're

forgiven and reclothed in honor. Whenever we feel that we don't measure up, we can remind ourselves that God removes our shame. Because Jesus measures up, all who trust Jesus measure up too.

2. *You're Loved and Accepted*

Shea Glover, an eighteen-year-old high school student from Chicago, recently conducted a social experiment at her school. She recorded video of classmates, capturing their reactions before and after she explained her purpose: "I'm taking pictures of things I find beautiful." After being called beautiful, almost every face lit up with joy.⁷ We can't help but light up when we're appreciated.

We tend to think that God tolerates us but can't possibly be very happy with us. The gospel corrects us by announcing that, although we did nothing to deserve it, we are intimately loved and accepted by God. The prophet Zephaniah, at the end of an Old Testament book that includes some stern warnings for the people of God, wrote this startling truth:

"The LORD your God is in your midst,
 a mighty one who will save;
 he will rejoice over you with gladness;
 he will quiet you by his love;
 he will exult over you with loud singing."
 (Zeph. 3:17)

Isn't that staggering? God doesn't just tolerate us; He rejoices over us. He exults over us with loud singing. To *exult* means to express great joy, and can even include actions like leaping, shrieking ecstatically, and shouting with joy. God isn't reserved in His affections for His people. He overflows in love for us. We can now approach God like a young son approaches his loving father (Rom. 8:15). And hard things somehow seem easier when we know we're loved.

Jesus Himself said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:13). Jesus’ work is both the foundation of and the greatest evidence of God’s love for us. On the basis of this good news, nothing can separate us from God’s love (Rom. 8:35). We can’t mess it up. God doesn’t just tolerate us. He lavishes us with love. We apply the gospel when we remind ourselves of His love, and enter into the relationship Jesus has made possible for us. Because of the gospel, we enjoy intimacy with God Himself.

Remind yourself regularly: God loves those who trust Him. You are loved. Keep yourself close to this love (Jude 1:21).

3. You’ve Been Given the Power to Change

I once tried to ride a bike forty miles uphill. That may seem like nothing, but it was more than I could handle. I had to call my wife Charlene to come pick me up and drive me and the bike the rest of the way.

He rewires us so that we don’t just act differently, but we desire differently. We begin to love the things that he loves.

In the same way, we lack the power to change ourselves. The story of the Bible is the story of human inability to obey God—at least until Jesus came. Jesus’ birth changed everything. When we believe, God gives us new hearts so

that we want to obey Him (Ezek. 36:26). He rewires us so that we don’t just *act* differently, but we *desire* differently. We begin to love the things that He loves. He gives us new desires (Ps. 37:4).

And God gives us the Holy Spirit to empower our obedience. When we follow Jesus, the same power that raised Jesus from the dead begins to work in us (Eph. 1:19–20). He begins to develop new characteristics within us: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness,

goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Gal. 5:22–23). God guarantees that He will finish the work in us that He’s started (Phil. 1:6). He always finishes what He starts.

Of course we play a role. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul encouraged his readers to work out their salvation with fear and trembling. But even this is a product of God’s work within us. In the very next verse, Paul says it’s *God* who works in us so that we desire and act in new ways (Phil. 2:12–13). In fact, our role involves discipline and hard work (1 Cor. 9:27). But even our role is powered by God. Our hard work is necessary, but it’s only possible because God is empowering us to do this work.

An older friend told me that he biked through Holland. I was impressed by his athleticism until he told me that he used an e-bike. I don’t mean to insult e-bike riders, but I’m not sure you can say *you* cycled through Holland if your bike has an electric motor.

Once we follow Jesus, we’re all spiritual e-bikers. Nobody operates on their own power. God starts to work on us and gives us a power that we never had before. He’s renovating us from the inside out. When we struggle to change, we can remind ourselves that God has given us new hearts, and that He’s also given us the Holy Spirit to change and empower us. He gives us the power to change, and He always finishes what He’s started.

4. You’re Part of a New Family

Churches often don’t look like much. I’m not talking about the buildings; I’m talking about the people. It seems that they’re full of people like us: people who are imperfect, inconvenient, sometimes disappointing, and always a lot of work. But they’re also beautiful. Churches display the glory and wisdom of God. At their best they are foretastes of heaven. They’re where we grow, where we love and are loved, and where we learn what it means to be part of God’s family.

One of the greatest gifts God gives us through the gospel is membership in His family so that we don't have to live alone.

When I was a child, my father lived in Margate, a small resort town in southeast England. I lived in Canada and didn't see him regularly. My mother put my sister and me on a plane to visit him when I was twelve, which was one of the hardest things she'd ever done. She wanted us to know our dad, but she also knew that because of the complexity of international custody laws, she might never see us again.

I remember feeling lonely when we landed since I knew only one person on the continent, and I wasn't sure I could rely on him. But Dad picked us up promptly, which was a little reassuring. I still felt unsure of what would happen, though.

On our first Sunday we found our way to the Baptist church off the town square. I didn't know anyone there. I remember taking the bread and juice during Communion at the end of the service, and

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somehow felt like I was no longer alone. I can't explain it. I just felt like I was with family. I somehow knew that I could count on these people if needed because the gospel had made me family with them. I knew, even at that age, that God's people are everywhere on earth.

I felt this way again in Madison, Wisconsin, last year. Charlene and I ate at a restaurant in the town square. I knew only one person in the area and felt far from home. When food arrived at a nearby table, I watched as strangers bowed to thank God.

I didn't know them, but I experienced the same feeling of belonging. I knew we belonged together. Those of us who are in Christ have a big family. We're never alone.

What's true globally is also true locally. Because we started a church from scratch, I didn't have many people in my church family a few years ago. I'm glad I do now. As the church grew, so did my family. My local church family has faces and names. We laugh together, pray together, and learn from one another. It's not perfect; we annoy each other too, but that's okay. I love knowing that I'm not alone, and that I have people who are watching out for me, just as I'm watching out for them. We have nothing in common except for Jesus, and that's enough. Family isn't merely a metaphor: we are brothers and sisters because of the gospel.

This means that it's important to take our spiritual family seriously. When we understand that the local church is a family of brothers and sisters, we'll make it a priority in our lives. We won't settle for only attending worship services when it's convenient, nor will we approach church with a consumer mindset. We'll dig into the messiness of local church life, opening up our lives to our new spiritual family. Families are messy and costly, but worth it. When we live our lives like we really are spiritual brothers and sisters, it changes everything.

Family is one of the greatest blessings of the gospel. We're never alone. We have family everywhere. We can love and be loved and display God's glory in ways that we never could alone.

5. You Can Have Hope When You Suffer

I've learned to avoid giving easy answers when other people are suffering. It's usually much better to offer friendship, silent companionship, and practical help rather than words.

As I've walked through hard times myself and alongside others, I've discovered three truths that have been of great comfort.

First, it's okay to grieve. I'm grateful the Bible gives us permission to do this. In fact, the book of Psalms contains more songs of lament than any other kind of psalm. There's a time to weep, both for ourselves and with others who are going through difficult times (Rom. 12:15).

Second, we're invited to pray. My prayers in the middle of suffering aren't articulate, but that's okay. As Paul explained in his letter to the Romans, "For we do not know what to pray for as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groanings too deep for words" (Rom. 8:26). God knows what we're saying even when we lack words. And more importantly, He cares.

Finally, I've found it helpful to remember that God is at work even through our suffering. I don't say this lightly, nor do I always understand it, but it's true. This won't erase the pain, but it allows us to rest in the fact that God hasn't lost control. He promises to work everything together for good in this life (Rom. 8:28), and He will wipe every tear from our eyes, and will eliminate death, mourning, and fear (Rev. 21:4). If you, like Sam Gamgee in *The Lord of the Rings*, wonder "is everything sad going to come untrue?"⁸ you're not alone.

We don't always understand what God is doing. "How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" exclaims Paul (Rom. 11:33). The gospel doesn't give us the *answers*, but it gives us *assurance* that God hasn't abandoned us.

These truths don't eliminate our tears or short-circuit our grief, but they provide immeasurable comfort. God is so committed to us in Jesus that He has promised to use even the hard things in life for our ultimate good, even if we can't see it at the time.

6. You Can Know Your Life Has Meaning

Recent data indicates that early retirement may lead to a shorter life span.⁹ It turns out that we gain economic, social, and

other benefits from our work. We thrive when our lives are full of purpose, meaning, and identity.

The gospel is what truly gives us what our souls crave: a deep sense of our innate value and identity. Through the gospel, we become God's own children, His precious possession, His royal priesthood (1 Peter 2:9). We're given important tasks that matter for eternity—to make disciples and to use our gifts to serve others (Matt. 28:18–20; 1 Peter 4:10–11).

I often feel insignificant. When I focus on the fact that I'm one of 7.6 billion people alive on a tiny planet in a vast universe, it doesn't seem to matter how hard I work or what I leave behind. I will be forgotten. A hundred years from now, nobody will even remember that I was alive.

Yet I won't be forgotten by God. I've been adopted by Him. Scripture tells us we matter and none of our work for Him will be wasted (1 Cor. 15:58). We're given an identity that can't be taken away, and our actions matter, not just now but for eternity. We have everything we need to live lives of significance.

7. You Have an Example to Follow

We often learn best by example. The problem with examples is that they can sometimes discourage us. Usain Bolt doesn't encourage me to be a better runner, for instance. He encourages me to give up because no matter how hard I try, I'll never run like him.

If we're not careful, the example of Jesus might dishearten us because we feel we can never measure up. But when we're gripped by what Jesus did for us, His example actually motivates us. I had a hard time forgiving somebody a couple of years ago. Remembering how much Jesus forgave me when I didn't deserve it motivated

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me to extend forgiveness to that individual (Luke 7:47). It didn't happen instantly or easily, but it happened. The gospel served as an example and motivation at the same time.

Jesus provides an example for us in so many areas. The Bible uses Jesus' actions as a pattern for us, and it also gives us the power to follow this pattern, which we couldn't do on our own. We may not want to be generous, until we consider how generous Jesus has been to us (2 Cor. 8:9). Men may not know how to love their wives, but they learn from and are motivated by the way Jesus treasures the church, His bride (Eph. 5:25–30). When we're mistreated, we can remember that Jesus was mistreated for us (1 Peter 2:21–25). When we see what Jesus did for us, it motivates us to follow His example.

BRINGING THE GOSPEL TO LIFE

The gospel doesn't just bring us into right relationship with God and assure us of our future with Him; it also provides rich resources for dealing with every part of life—our marriages, work

lives, relationships, habits, bodies, emotions, and more. It has the power to change every part of our lives from the inside out. There's nothing that it leaves alone.

The gospel isn't just good news that gets us to heaven. It's God Himself, who is in relationship with us, who is transforming us, and who gives us everything that we need.

The gospel isn't just good news that gets us to heaven. It's not even a set of resources or benefits that we get to enjoy. It's God Himself, who is

in relationship with us, who is transforming us, and who gives us everything that we need.

The old hymn “How Firm a Foundation, Ye Saints of the Lord” asks the question: “What more can He say than to you He hath said, / who unto the Savior for refuge have fled?” Good question. God hasn’t held back. He’s lavished believers with benefits through the gospel that we can apply to our lives. The Bible assures us that change is possible as we enjoy the intimacy with God that is ours through the gospel, and as we live off its benefits. We can be transformed by the renewal of our minds (Rom. 12:2).

God has given us untold riches. Paul prayed for the Ephesian believers that they would have “the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (Eph. 1:18). This should be our prayer too: that we grow in our knowledge of the riches we have in the gospel, and that we begin to live with the knowledge that all these riches are ours and more.

Fighting shame or feeling guilty? Don’t believe the lies. God silences your accuser, and He’s re clothed you with the righteousness of Jesus. The final verdict has been spoken over your life, and nothing can change that.

Criticized, justly or unjustly? Worse things could be said about us all, but God knows the worst about us and has chosen to pardon and love us, and the court’s been adjourned.

Disappointed by the actions of others, or feeling lonely? You couldn’t be more loved than you are in Christ. You have the love of your Father. He exults over you. He sings over you.

Frustrated by your lack of progress? Struggling with negative or damaging patterns of behavior? God is at work in your life. He promises His power. He’s changing you from the inside out, and He always finishes what He starts.

Tired of trying to make it on your own? He’s given you a family, and that family is everywhere. He invites you to join part of His family near you to display His glory and to love and be loved.

Going through hard times? God knows and God cares. He invites us to grieve, pray, and trust that He's at work even when it's hard. He will one day wipe the tears from our eyes and eliminate death, mourning, and fear (Rev. 21:3–5).

Looking for purpose? God gives us a new identity, meaning, and responsibility. Your life matters because of the gospel. You're now called to faithfully use everything He's given you—your time, body, and more.

Need motivation? The blessings of the gospel motivate us to live lives of worship, gratitude, and service. We've been given an example to follow.

Feeling insecure? The gospel motivates us to stop looking at ourselves and instead look to Jesus, and to begin to put others ahead of us. It gives us the freedom of self-forgetfulness.¹⁰ We'll get to what we must do soon enough. The place to begin, though, is with the good news of what Jesus has done for us.

I started this chapter with the story of Lola, a woman who grew up in slavery. In some ways, Lola's not like us. She did nothing to deserve her slavery. She was a victim. We're culpable in our slavery. We've rebelled against God.

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We are like Lola in one way—we have a hard time accepting our freedom. Once Alex invited Lola to live with him, she continued old behaviors: She threw nothing out. She rifled through the trash to make sure others hadn't thrown out anything useful. She washed and reused paper towels. She kept grocery bags, yogurt containers, and pickle jars. She was free and had everything she needed, yet she continued to live like a poor slave. We're the same. Though we've been set free, we often live like the resources of the gospel aren't ours.

Our greatest problem isn't that we lack freedom. We've been offered freedom and unimaginable wealth through the gospel. Our problem is that we have a hard time living as if it's true.

The key to living like you believe Jesus has freed you from your old identity as a slave is having "the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints, and what is the immeasurable greatness of his power toward us who believe, according to the working of his great might" (Eph. 1:18–19). In other words, we must *accept* what's true and then *live* like it's true.

We'll get to what we must do soon enough. The place to begin, though, is with the good news of what Jesus has *done* for us. Believe it. Celebrate it. This news gives us everything we need to grow.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- The gospel sets us free, but we tend to continue living like we're slaves.
- The gospel is the good news that God has chosen to rescue His people and the world through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus.
- The gospel changes everything personally and relationally. It will eventually lead to the renewal of the whole world.
- The gospel gives us immediate benefits when we believe. It also gives us ongoing benefits for all of life.
- The gospel frees us from guilt and shame.
- Because of the gospel and through the gospel, God lavishes us with love. He doesn't tolerate us; He exults over us.
- God transforms us from the inside out. He gives us the

Holy Spirit to change, and promises that He will complete the process of transformation.

- God puts us into community so that we can love and be loved, and display His glory.
- God cares for us in our griefs, uses even our suffering for our good, and will one day undo and banish all that's bad.
- God fills our lives with identity, meaning, and responsibility.
- When we consider what Jesus has done for us, we're motivated to follow His example.
- God gives us even more riches than these. We can pray to know and enjoy more of the blessings He gives us through the gospel.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. How would you explain the gospel?
2. What truth about the gospel means the most to you?
3. Why do you think we often treat the gospel as old news rather than the best news ever?
4. This chapter outlines seven things that are true for those who have trusted Jesus. Which of the seven truths means the most to you right now?



What Do I Do Now?

- Pick a truth about the gospel, and spend some time thinking about it. Ask God to allow you to really understand it both intellectually and emotionally.
- Consider whether you have responded to the gospel with repentance and faith. If you haven't, I encourage you to do so today.
- Think about one way your life would change if you really believed the gospel is true. Ask God to begin to make that change happen.
- Pray that you would have “the eyes of your hearts enlightened, that you may know what is the hope to which he has called you, what are the riches of his glorious inheritance in the saints” (Eph. 1:18).

CHAPTER TWO

WE'RE CREATED TO GROW



*In truth there is nothing more thrilling, more solid,
more exhilarating, more humanity-restoring,
more radiantly joyous, than holiness.*

DANE ORTLUND, EDWARDS ON THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

I've never met a person who doesn't want to grow, nor have I met a person who's satisfied with his or her growth. We feel the tension: we long for growth, but we often feel stuck and apathetic. We can relate to what the author of Hebrews writes: "For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic principles of the oracles of God. You need milk, not solid food" (Heb. 5:12). We're not as far along as we thought we'd be.

We understand what Carl Sandburg said: "There is an eagle

in me that wants to soar, and there's a hippopotamus in me that wants to wallow in the mud."¹ Much of the time, the hippopotamus seems to win.

This book is written to help address our desire for growth, along with our frustration that we haven't made as much progress as we'd like. This book isn't just about spiritual growth. We're complex creatures. God made us as humans with bodies, emotions, relationships, minds, and souls. It's impossible to compartmentalize these areas. If I'm stuck in one, it's going to affect the others. If we make progress in one, it will also affect every other area. God cares about all of our lives, so this book is about how to apply the gospel to all of life.

***God made us to grow.
It's important to
understand what
growth is, and the
pathway He's
designed for growth.***

I've read many self-help books, and I'm afraid most of them haven't helped. The label identifies the problem: we can't really help ourselves. We need God to change us, and we need the help of others. Change is possible, but it only comes as we learn about the means God has provided for us to change, and as we slowly and imperfectly place ourselves in the paths of grace. God has promised to meet us there. We're going to explore some of these in the second half of this book.

The news is good: we can grow in ways we haven't imagined, and we can help those around us grow too. But we must first learn how to grow, and then begin to practice the habits that will put us in the path of God's grace. This book is designed to help. God made us to grow. It's important to understand what growth is, and the pathway He's designed for growth.

THE CONTEXT: ALL OF LIFE

This book isn't about discipleship the way we normally think about it. Books on discipleship often focus on becoming a better Christian through better quiet times, memorizing Bible verses, learning to pray, and showing up at church. All of this is important—vital, actually—but it's not enough. By contrast, this book is about experiencing transformation in every part of our lives.

The gospel of Luke concludes the childhood years of Jesus with two statements that summarize His early years: “And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him. . . . And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man” (Luke 2:40, 52). Luke reports that Jesus kept growing in four areas of life:

- **wisdom** (skill in living)
- **stature** (physical growth and health)
- **favor with God** (spiritually)
- **favor with man** (socially)

What's amazing about this is how ordinary and familiar it is. Even Jesus, who is God in the flesh, had to grow. Luke's words echo the story of another child who lived hundreds of years earlier: “Now the boy Samuel continued to grow both in stature and in favor with the LORD and also with man” (1 Sam. 2:26). Although Jesus was unique, He still had to grow by degrees just like the rest of us do. He had to grow physically. He learned a trade. He enjoyed food. He observed rhythms of work and rest. He attended social events such as weddings and funerals. He learned how to pray and how to relate to others. He developed life skills. He didn't live on some spiritual plane detached from reality, but grew as a person in a particular time and place. To be alive as a person means to grow—not just spiritually, but in every dimension of our humanity.

God cares about our minds. As John Stott writes in *Your Mind Matters*, “God has revealed himself in *words* to *minds*. His revelation is a rational revelation to rational creatures.”² He created us to think, and in creation He gave us a task—creating culture—that requires our mental faculties. Although our mental capacities were damaged by sin, God renews our minds (Rom. 12:2).

God cares about our bodies. I’m always amazed by how physical and sensory the Bible is. We’re told about people eating, walking, sleeping, moving to various locations, defecating, fighting, having sex, and more—all very physical things. Even the resurrected Jesus shows up in a body that can be touched, a body that eats. In eternity, we’ll have physical, resurrected bodies on the new earth, not disembodied spirits floating on the clouds. We’re not souls

To be alive as a person means to grow—not just spiritually, but in every dimension of our humanity.

trapped in a body; we are physical beings. God cares about what we do with our bodies: how we eat, who we sleep with, what we wear, and more. “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body” (1 Cor. 6:19–20).

God cares about our relationships. Jesus modeled this: He enjoyed a network of friends and is frequently found visiting homes and sharing meals. Many of the New Testament letters outline in detail how we’re to act within the context of our various relationships: the church, those who are skeptical about Jesus, as well as our friends and families.

God cares about our work, which is a good thing, considering many of us will spend more than sixty thousand hours on the job throughout the course of our life. Rather than working just to survive, our work fulfills God’s mandate to Adam and Eve to

fill and subdue the earth, and to bring order out of chaos (Gen. 1:28; 2:15)—and as a form of worship and love. The gospel brings meaning to our work, even work that seems mundane.³ “Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ” (Col. 3:23–24).

We need what Tish Harrison Warren calls a liturgy of the ordinary: a sense of God’s presence in every part of our ordinary life.⁴ Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians, “Whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him” (Col. 3:17). That’s what I’m interested in. “Whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31).

WHAT GROWTH ISN'T

Sometimes we get confused about what growth is. Because of this, we may end up failing because we’ve succeeded at the wrong goal. Here are some things that growth isn’t.

Growth isn’t self-help. By self-help, I mean the idea that we can find the resources we need to change within ourselves. The Bible never presents spiritual maturity and growth as something we can bring about solely through our own efforts. As Jared C. Wilson writes in *The Imperfect Disciple*, “Do you know why there are a thousand fresh self-help books every year? It’s because they don’t work. We keep looking for the answer within us, as if we’ll find it in the same place as the problems. Self-help is like sticking your broken hand in the blender, thinking that’ll fix it.”⁵ We can’t help ourselves because our problems run far too deep. And the issue isn’t just that we do bad things; it’s that we’re enslaved to sin. Because of the Fall, we’re predisposed to act out of self-serving motives and we can’t overcome this tendency on our own. We need a power outside of

ourselves to change us and set us free, and this power is only found in the gospel.

Many of our approaches to spiritual growth assume too much about our ability to affect change ourselves. Instead of self-help, our hope rests in the fact that God's divine power "has granted to us all things that pertain to life and godliness, through the knowledge of him who called us to his own glory and excellence" (2 Peter 1:3). Any attempts to grow apart from God are doomed to fail.

Growth isn't just more information. Sometimes we assume people just need to *know* more in order to experience growth. To be sure, knowledge is important. Scripture teaches us about God, and it's critical that we know more about Him. We need what Scripture teaches us in order to grow (2 Tim. 3:15–17). But knowledge isn't enough. The apostle Paul himself recognized that knowledge can make us more arrogant (1 Cor. 8:1). Many of us know a lot about God, but it hasn't always translated into greater holiness. We need more than another workbook or curriculum. Knowledge is essential, but it's not enough.

Growth isn't about the latest program. We're sometimes tempted to think that we need a new book or product if we're going to grow. Entire industries are built on revealing the missing keys that have been holding you back—the secret key to unlocking our greatness. We don't need a new approach, or newly discovered knowledge, though. We need to rediscover something that's existed for generations, and must be continually discovered and reapplied. We don't need something new; we need something old that we're likely to overlook.

Growth isn't about behavioral modification. Growth isn't about changing our behavior or controlling ourselves when we're tempted to sin. It goes much deeper. It gets to the very core of who we are: our heart. It is, as Dallas Willard put it, a renovation of the heart.⁶ We miss out if we settle for merely acting differently,

if it's not flowing from inner transformation. God wants to accomplish much more in us.

So, go beyond self-help. Don't be content with seeking information, a new approach, or superficial change. Don't settle for less than God desires. It's tragic when we succeed at the wrong goal. Our goal in growth must be nothing less than what God intends for us.

WHAT GROWTH IS

According to the *Westminster Shorter Catechism*, sanctification—another word for the kind of growth we're talking about—is: “the work of God's free grace, whereby we are renewed in the *whole man* after the image of God, and are enabled more and more to die unto sin, and live unto righteousness.”⁷ J. I. Packer provides a helpful clarification, “The concept is not of sin being totally eradicated (that is to claim too much) or merely counteracted (that is to say too little), but of a divinely wrought character change freeing us from sinful habits and forming in us Christlike affections, dispositions, and virtues.”⁸ With that in mind, here are the hallmarks of authentic spiritual growth.

Growth takes place by God's grace. We don't grow on our own. We can't just pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. God promises us His Spirit to transform us from the inside out.

Growth is for all of life. God changes every part of us; the gospel applies to every part of life. It's just as relevant for our recreation, leisure, relationships, physical health and wellness, as it is for our devotional and church lives.

Growth isn't about us. Don't get me wrong: growth changes us, but it's not *about* us. It will increase our joy and transform us. But growth is about love for God and others. Growth helps us to love God and others in the everyday realities of our complicated lives.

Growth transforms us into Christ's image. God made us in His image; that image has been tarnished by sin, but has not been destroyed. God works in us to restore that image and to make us who God designed us to be.

***Growth changes us,
but it's not about us.
It will increase our joy
and transform us.
But growth is about love
for God and others.***

Growth frees us from sin and to righteousness. God sets us free from our greatest problem, and changes us from the inside out so that we can live for Him.

Growth is about habits and desire. Growth isn't abstract. It is revealed by the things and activities we choose to invest ourselves in.

As James K. A. Smith says, we are what we love.⁹ It also shows up in our habits: the daily practices that make us who we are.

So often we think the Christian life is just about forgiveness of our sins, losing sight of God's plan to completely transform us. We settle for an impoverished vision of growth in one or two areas of life, when God's desire is to reign over every part. We believe growth is up to us, forgetting that the Spirit dwells within us. We think of sanctification in lofty, abstract terms, neglecting to translate it into the rhythms of our moments and days. Jeff Vanderstelt captures what a comprehensive picture of spiritual growth looks like:

It is the ongoing process of submitting all of life to Jesus, and seeing him saturate your entire life and world with his presence and power. It's a process of daily growing in your awareness of your need for him in the everyday stuff of life. It is walking with Jesus, being filled with Jesus, and being led by Jesus in every place and in every way.¹⁰

This is what I want to tackle in this book. More than that though, I want to describe the practical steps we can take to grow spiritually and in every other area of our lives.

OUR INTERCONNECTED LIVES

My wife, Charlene, spoke to me recently about the growth she's seen in her life over the past five years. She's always been insightful and caring, and I love that she pursues God with honesty and tenderness. But in the last five years, she grew in a way we didn't expect: through a fitness and nutrition program. Charlene has become healthier physically and she's also developed more emotional resilience. In the process, she's also grown in her walk with God and in her relationship with others. Her recent growth wasn't because she doubled down on spiritual disciplines. It began as she pursued habits of physical wellbeing—healthy eating, increased movement and exercise, a daily sleep routine—which affected all of the other areas of her life. She writes,

When my weight was excessive I thought of stewardship in spiritual and relational terms. I made no connections between my habits of haphazard sleep, skipping meals, and lack of physical movement to “what mattered most” spiritually.

One of my first spiritual connections came when I was required to practice the habit of a sleep routine. While I already had a practice of Sabbath, now I began to look at the quality of my physical, daily rest. Inconsistent evening activities resulted in frequent nights of too little sleep followed by days and nights of too much sleep. As I pursued greater consistency in my hours of sleep I learned to support my goal of a good

night's sleep by developing a sleep routine—limiting electronics and media after 9:00 pm, communicating my evening plans to others in my home, turning down the lights, getting ready for bed—a pattern of signals and cues to prepare my body for rest. As I practiced these behaviors, I gained an increasing awareness of the connection between evening and morning—my bodily lived experience aligned more fully with the pattern of Genesis—evening and morning together form a day.

Experiencing biblical images and phrases come alive physically continued as I pursued physical well-being. In the winter of 2015 a friend encouraged me to try a triathlon just for fun. The New Testament's comparison of spiritual growth to athletic training, competing within the race boundaries, the joy of crossing the finish line, hearing your name called to the cheers of the crowd, to finish the course, the winner crowned, these words moved from thought to physical reality. Alive in experience, these words of scripture forever change my relating to and embracing of these Scriptures.

As I progressed with developing habits for physical health and wellbeing, the connection between my physical body and spiritual and emotional health began to increase. The benefits of eating healthy foods slowly, increased exercise and better rest, contributed to measurable improvements in my health and noticeable positive impacts on my emotional resilience and mood. The Lord was redeeming my body, mind and soul into a more complete expression of what he created it to be.¹¹

Don't get me wrong. I'm not saying a healthy diet and workout routine will automatically result in a healthy soul. But the various components of our lives are interconnected, and, as God deals with one part of our lives it affects all the others. As we submit one part of our life to God and live in His power, we'll see growth in every part of life. God wants to renovate your entire life, beginning with the deepest parts of you.

LET'S COMMIT TO GROWTH

So let's commit to growth. Discipling others and growing in spiritual maturity ourselves—these tasks lie at the very heart of our mission as believers. We must grow. It's God's intent for each of us. You were made to grow. Not only that, but you *can* grow. God has given us means by which we can experience His grace and be transformed. Best of all, He hasn't left us alone. He's given us His Spirit and His people to help us to grow. So let's pursue growth, for ourselves and for our churches. You were made for this.

In the next chapter, we're going to examine what growth looks like. It's a much richer, more complex picture than what we usually imagine. Then, in later chapters, we're going to explore where to start, and the practical steps you can take to grow. Finally, we'll look at how to help others grow too.

CHAPTER SUMMARY

- We were made to desire growth.
- We're meant to grow in every part of life: in our minds, bodies, work, and our relationship with God and others.
- Growth isn't self-help, accumulating more information, looking for a new approach, or behavioral modification.

- Growth is the renewal of every part of our lives by God's grace. It transforms us into God's image, frees us from sin, and involves our habits and desires.
- By God's grace, growth is possible.

Questions for Personal Reflection or Group Discussion

1. When is a time that you have experienced growth? What factors do you think led to that growth?
2. Why do you think that we sometimes believe that God is only interested in our spiritual lives?
3. In which area of your life—intellectual, physical, mental, relational, spiritual—do you want to grow most?
4. "Growth is the renewal of every part of our lives by God's grace. It transforms us into God's image, frees us from sin, and involves our habits and desires." What do you think of this understanding of growth?
5. In what ways do you hope to grow in the coming year?



What Do I Do Now?

- Do a quick assessment of the various areas of your life: intellectual, physical, mental, relational, and spiritual. Think about how you would like to grow in each of these areas. (Visit <https://gospelforlife.com/assessment> for a quick assessment tool.)
- Spend some time praying about each of these areas. Acknowledge that you need God's help. Commit each of these areas to God.