

# What is the Gospel? [Hint: It's Not What You Think]

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What is the Gospel? Well, it depends on who you ask.

Many Christians today would say that the gospel is all about being able to claim that “Jesus died for my sins, and he is my personal Lord and Saviour.”

The technical name for that understanding is the “Penal Substitutionary Atonement Theory” or the “Satisfaction Atonement Theory.” I’ve written many times about the limitations of that view.

In case you missed it, this way of understanding the death of Jesus is not the Gospel. Not according to Jesus, and not according to most of the writers of the gospels and letters which we find in the New Testament. Satisfaction Atonement Theory didn’t actually show up in its full form until about a thousand years after Christ.

The gospel which Jesus preached is not about his death. Rather, Jesus’ intention is found near the beginning of Mark, when Jesus proclaimed that: “The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand (or among you).” Both translations of the last part of the verse are possible. God’s kingdom is at hand, or God’s kingdom is already among us.

Full stop.

Notice that Jesus says absolutely nothing about death. Neither does he mention anything about “payment for sins.” There is nothing about Jesus being our personal Lord and Saviour. In fact, that last sentence only arose in North America in the last century or so. Trust North Americans to think that the gospel is all about us.

For Jesus, the gospel is all about God. Simply put, Jesus proclaimed the “good news” (which is what “gospel” means) that the kingdom of God can be experienced in this life by anyone who wants to learn to follow Jesus in their daily life. For Jesus, “kingdom of God” does not mean heaven, or life after death. Rather, it is a metaphor for what life looks like when God is actually in charge. It is life marked by justice, compassion, and love.

Jesus talks about the kingdom repeatedly. Most of his parables begin with an introduction like this: “To what shall I compare the Kingdom of God? The kingdom of God is like ...” And then Jesus tells a story about a man who finds a treasure in a field, or a man who searches for precious pearls, or a woman who loses a coin, or a shepherd who seeks for sheep, or a man who has two sons, and so on.

Read the gospels carefully, and you will find it for yourself. Matthew uses the phrase “kingdom of heaven,” which means exactly the same thing.

And it’s not just in the gospels. The book of Acts continues the theme. Acts 1:3 says that “After his suffering he [Jesus] presented himself alive to them by many convincing proofs, appearing to them over the course of forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God.” Jesus didn’t just proclaim the kingdom of God in his earthly ministry. It remained his continuing theme, and his charge to the continuing church.

The book of Acts presents Paul as the one who “has gone among you preaching the kingdom of God.” (Acts 20:25) “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God.” (Acts 19:8). “[Paul] proclaimed the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ—with all boldness and without hindrance!” (Acts 28:31)

In his own, authentic letters, Paul also taught the same gospel about the kingdom of God. “The kingdom of God is not a matter of talk, but of power.” (1 Corinthians 4:20) “The kingdom of God is ... righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit.” (Romans 14:17)

Over and over again throughout the New Testament, from Jesus through Paul to other writers, the consistent theme is the kingdom of God. It’s not about Jesus dying for me. It’s not about Jesus paying the price for my sins. It’s not about Jesus being my personal Lord and Saviour.

It’s all about God and how we might learn to live in the world as if God were really in charge.

So, what’s the big deal?

The big deal is that despite what we hear so often by Christian commentators and preachers on television that the gospel is all about us ... about what Jesus does for *me*, and my response, it really isn’t. The gospel is about God, and God’s loving purposes in the world.

Now, having said all that, there is one passage in 1 Corinthians 15: 1–8 where Paul (not Jesus) tells us that the gospel is about Jesus dying for our sins. Paul writes, “I passed on as of first importance that Christ died for our sins ... that he was buried, that he was raised ... and that he appeared.”

That’s it. One verse out of 7,957 in the New Testament.

The problem with this seems quite obvious to me. No theologian worthy of the name would base a whole doctrine on one line in a letter to the church in Corinth, especially when the rest of the New Testament proclaims the kingdom of God.

Someone asked me a short while ago why I believe what I believe. This is part of it. It’s important to read carefully what is actually in the Bible, rather than to believe what others have said about what might be there.

I also believe that when Jesus says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10), he is talking about living a life based on the kingdom of God here and now.

If Jesus, Paul, and other New Testament writers proclaim the kingdom of God as the gospel, why do we continue to insist on something different?

We can’t. Followers of Jesus also seek to live within the embrace of the kingdom of God.