

What is the "Gospel?"

We hear the word "gospel" all the time: "gospel music," the "gospel truth," "repent and believe the gospel," etc. But do we really know what we mean when we say "gospel?"

"Gospel" means "Good News"

Quite simply, "gospel" is just an old word for "good news." The "Gospel of Jesus Christ" means the "Good News of Jesus Christ." Yes - "church people" can sometimes seem grim and lifeless, but the Gospel never is. It's "Good News!"—Actually, more than that: it's the best news anyone could ever get.

The Gospel is Simple, but not Simplistic

The book of Mark (in the New Testament) starts out "The beginning of the gospel (good news) of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." If Mark took a whole book of the Bible to begin the good news, then we'd best not condense it down too quickly! We owe it to ourselves to spend some time pondering this "Good News."

Some people over-simplify the Gospel: they boil it down to a catch phrase or a short list of propositions. It's good to make things as understandable as possible (Jesus did it all the time), but we dare not leave out choice pieces of meat in order to make things easy to swallow. We want to learn the whole counsel of God, because it's all "Good News."

But some people over-complicate the Gospel too. They make it sound as though you need a seminary degree, a doctorate in philosophy, and a working knowledge of quantum mechanics in order to properly understand it. That's too bad, since Jesus confidently sent out a bunch of former fishermen, tax collectors, and prostitutes to preach the "Good News of the Kingdom." It hasn't gotten any more complicated since then (or at least it shouldn't have).

A famous quote about the New Testament book of John could be applied to the whole Gospel: "It's shallow enough for a child to play in, but deep enough for an elephant to drown in."

Come on in - the water's great!

The Gospel is Necessary

But why do we need Good News? Is there a problem?

Well...yes. The first book of the Bible, Genesis, tells us that in the beginning God made "the heavens and the earth" (a Hebrew way of saying "everything"). He made human beings to be his image on the earth (to rule in his name), and he created us to be in perfect, joyful relationship with himself. He saw all of this and said it was "good."

But he gave us the choice to either be in that perfect, trusting relationship with him, or to go our own way - to be wise in our own eyes. Genesis tells us that the first humans, Adam and Eve, chose independence from God - they chose to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil: they chose to "be like God" rather than to be mere creatures of God. They disobeyed God's word.

The results were catastrophic for themselves and for all of their descendents. True life can only be found in our Creator - it's his gift to us, and he's the only source of life. If we choose to be disconnected from him, we choose death. We're created to be trees planted by a stream of Living Water, but we choose the way of the tumbleweed - cracked and brittle, directionless - drifting about with the shifting winds. The way Jesus put it is to say, "I am the vine and you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned."

So death and destruction are the natural results of being disconnected from God. If you've ever weeded a garden you know how the weeds start to look once they've been uprooted and laid in the sun for a few days. That's us - apart from God.

The news gets worse before it gets better...

Not only are we disconnected from God by nature - we have sinned against him. Our choices that we make every day apart from him are not morally neutral. It's not just that we choose differently from God. We choose against God - every day. Our minds have been darkened, and the things that seem wise to us are an offense to him. Because God is just, he can't allow these offenses to go unpunished.

So human beings apart from God find ourselves in this position: separated from God, our source of life, yet unable (and unwilling) to draw near to him lest we face his wrath for our sins.

What do we need? We need someone who is powerful enough to change our stubborn hearts and call us back to God in a way that we will answer. We need someone who will take the punishment (the wrath of God) on our behalf for our sins, who will save us from death and eternal separation from God in hell. We need someone who will connect us back to the Vine. We need someone who will restore—even renew—the creation back to the way God intended it.

We need a savior.

The Gospel was Promised Long Ago

The good news is that God has a solution to this problem.

The Old Testament is the account of God calling the tribe of Israel to be his people for the world. He promises Israel that in them all the nations of the world will be blessed. Israel did not know how God was going to use them to bless the world—they only knew they were to be faithful to him—to be a people set apart for his purposes.

The Old Testament is remarkably honest about the failure of God's people to follow him. In the Old Testament God refers to Israel often as a "stiff-necked" people, who refuse to submit to him. Eventually they decay into utter rebellion against him, worshipping false gods and abandoning his Law, until he punishes them (for a time) by allowing them to be carted off into exile.

But the Old Testament prophets speak for God and carefully interpret Israel's past experiences in light of the coming new thing God was doing. Their experiences in Egypt, in the desert, in the

Promised Land, in exile—even the covenant and laws that God had established for them to relate with him through—were all going to be superceded by a new way of God relating to his people (The Bible calls this the new covenant); i.e., the “fulfillment” of all the old things was coming and it would have ramifications for the whole world, not just Israel. The prophet Jeremiah saw this from afar:

Behold, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah, not like the covenant that I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt, my covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, declares the LORD. But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, declares the LORD: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be my people. And no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, Know the LORD, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the LORD. For I will forgive their iniquity, and I will remember their sin no more.

Isaiah did too:

*The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
Because the Lord has anointed me
To bring good news to the afflicted;
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
To proclaim liberty to captives
And freedom to prisoners;
To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn,
To grant those who mourn in Zion,
Giving them a garland instead of ashes,
The oil of gladness instead of mourning,
The mantle of praise instead of a spirit of fainting.
So they will be called oaks of righteousness,
The planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.*

The Gospel of the Kingdom

It's no accident that the above passage is the exact one that Jesus got up and read in the synagogue early on in his ministry. With a finely honed flair for the dramatic, when he was done reading it, "He closed the book, gave it back to the attendant and sat down, and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he said to them, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

The book of Matthew says that Jesus went about "proclaiming the gospel of the kingdom, and healing every kind of disease and every kind of sickness among the people." He was exactly the sort of savior Israel had been promised - even though most of them were looking for someone different.

But what is the "gospel of the kingdom?" It's the good news that, in Jesus Christ, God has begun

to set his creation right again. That's why Jesus did specific things like healing people, casting out demons, causing the blind to see... He was showing that in him, the kingdom of God has come in power to restore what was lost when Adam and Eve fell. These things also served as physical metaphors for what he would accomplish for us on the cross (which we'll get to below).

The Good News of the kingdom is that the kingdom of God (God's good rulership over his creation) has been restored in Jesus Christ, so that all who are "in Christ" can participate in the kingdom right now. The Good News of the kingdom also means that God has begun the work in Christ that he will finish one day - when the whole creation will be made new and set right. The book of Revelation says that in that day, when "every tear will be wiped away," "every knee will bow and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."

What this means for us is that the kingdom of God is already here, in Christ, but it's not yet fully here. So we experience the kingdom in Christ's people (the Church) by the power of his Holy Spirit working in and through us, but we wait expectantly for the day when we will experience the kingdom in its fullness.

Right now, though, for the follower of Jesus Christ, the kingdom of God is a present reality. Believers in Jesus Christ are restored to God, are forgiven for our sins, are empowered by his Spirit to live in a way that's pleasing to him, are privileged to commune with him in prayer, are witnesses to his miraculous power to heal and to draw others to himself, and are free to worship him without guilt or shame.

The Cross

How is this possible? How can we be restored to relationship with God when we've all turned our backs on him? How can the holy be reconciled with the sinful?

Answer: through Jesus Christ alone.

Jesus said, "I am the Way and the Truth and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through Me." In Jesus Christ, God took on human flesh so that he could take the punishment we are due for our sins.

"The wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord." Our sin and our separation from God lead to death, but Jesus died that death for us on a cross, taking the wrath of God upon himself, and he defeated death by rising from the dead. "God made him who knew no sin to become sin so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Those who are "in Christ" are already spiritually resurrected into new life, but also live with the hope that they will rise physically with him on the Last Day as well. We will be with God - enjoying him forever. But this is only possible through Jesus' death and resurrection; indeed, through the cross all things are made new!

The Apostle Paul, who at one time persecuted Christians before the risen Christ appeared to him and changed his life forever, put the Gospel like this: "We preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. Because the foolishness of God is

wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."

He goes on to say, "I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that he was buried, and that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve. After that he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom remain until now, but some have fallen asleep; then he appeared to James, then to all the apostles; and last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared to me also."

What Do I Do With the Gospel?

The Bible says "Believe in the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved." The pattern throughout the New Testament is that people hear the Gospel, they believe, they turn from their old sinful ways, they are baptized to make a public declaration of their belief, and then they join with the people of God in Christian community.

The reason we started Hope Community Church is so people might hear the Gospel, believe, be baptized as a public declaration of their faith, and then live in joyful community with other believers, growing in their faith and spreading the Gospel so that others may believe.

God is creating a new people for himself. We invite you to believe in Jesus Christ and join with his people in experiencing the kingdom of God now, by the power of his Holy Spirit, and in looking forward with us to the day when he brings his kingdom in all its fullness.

It can start with a prayer like this: "Lord God, I admit that I have turned away from you and that I am a sinner. I want to turn away from my sin and towards you. I accept the sacrifice that Your Son, Jesus Christ, made for me on the cross, and I want to live for you from this moment on. Please save me and make me your child. Holy Spirit, come and fill me—help me to live by your power rather than my own. Thank you Jesus for loving me; please help me to learn to love you more every day. Amen."

If you've prayed this prayer, then you're on your way to a new life in Jesus Christ! We encourage you now to get in touch with a Christian church where you can be taught what it means to follow Jesus, and where you can join with his people in worshiping him and growing closer to him daily.