

eciple:

Gospel

Encountering and remembering the good news of Jesus

VIDEO ENHANCED EDITION



Matt Eachus

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eciple.com

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Production and distribution: Vook®

Video shot on location at CentrePoint Ministries, 10 Warren St., Glens Falls, NY 12801

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Enhanced e-book ISBN-13: 978-1-625-39670-9

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Series Preface

The eciple series of e-books is designed to be a concise, focused, and simple tool in the hands of Christians and curious and skeptical non-Christians alike. Our desire is that through these works, you would be introduced to the Faith, strengthened in your walk with Christ, and encouraged to be a more committed servant of Jesus. You won't find academic, technical, or high-sounding language in these books. Plenty of those options are available from other publishers and authors. Instead, you'll find refreshing, easy-to-read, plain-language conversations about Jesus, his Church, the Bible, and what it means to live the Christian life. Our prayer is that through these accessible and simple works, the majesty, wisdom, and beautiful complexity of God would be seen in a way that stirs and strengthens faith in the hearts of our readers. Thank you for choosing this eciple work as part of your faith journey. We trust that it will be a worthy companion.

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Introduction

Gospel Encounters

Gospel encounters happen all the time. And they happen in a lot of different ways. Like snowflakes or DNA, no two people have identical stories, and yet in many ways, they're all the same, aren't they?

I was a confused and scared sixteen-year-old kid when I had my gospel encounter. Like so many people I've met over the years, I grew up in a "Christian" home with parents who had come to faith in Christ. I'd been in good churches my whole life — churches where people loved me, taught me what the Bible said, and challenged me to live my life for God and walk by faith. I'm so thankful for that great heritage. Because of that privilege, I don't ever remember a time in my life when I didn't know that God loved me and sent his only Son, Jesus, to die on the cross for my sins. But even though I knew those things, I had never received in a personal way the gift God offered me. Not until one amazing night in Bernville, Pennsylvania.

It was August of 1994 (I'm dating myself, I know), and I was attending a Christian camp with my church youth group. As a teenager I was wrestling with so many questions: Who was I? What was my life really about? What did I really believe? Would my parents' faith be my faith? Big questions. There were some more typical teenage questions, too — about girls in general, and one or two in particular about friends and family.

Perhaps you remember the angst of being a teenager. Everything felt so uncertain and unsettled. I was just trying to find some answers to life. And there in southeast Pennsylvania, in a little chapel on the back side of a pig farm, I heard a message I had heard a thousand times before. But that night something was different. The message was closer to home this time. More personal. It was as if God was talking to me. And I was finally listening.

That night God told me about his love for me: that even though I was a sinner who didn't measure up to his standard of perfection, and even though my heart stubbornly rebelled against him, he loved me anyway. He loved me not because of what I had done or failed to do but because I was his creation, made in his image. And what he wanted was for me to become all he created me to be. To show me his love, he sent Jesus, his

only Son, to die for my sins and shortcomings and give me eternal life instead of the punishment I deserved for breaking his laws.

After listening to the gospel message, I walked out of that little chapel into the hot, humid Pennsylvania night, sat down in the dark under a little tree, breathed deeply, filling my lungs with that pig farm air, and responded. I cried my heart out to God, told him that I agreed with him: I was a sinner who had missed his standard of perfection, I was rebellious and stubborn, and I was in desperate need. I knew that no matter how hard I tried, I'd never be able to fix these problems on my own. I thanked Jesus for dying on the cross for me and asked him to save me from my sins and from the penalty that was coming my way. At that moment, as I lay facedown in the grass under my tree, God rescued me from my sin and gave me a new life. It was a good night indeed.

That's my story. That's how I encountered the gospel – the good news about Jesus. But it's not the only way those encounters work. Everyone's story is different. Some people hear their pastors proclaim the gospel from the pulpit at church, or in some other church setting, and they respond to an invitation to come forward during the service. Some hear the gospel from their parents over the course of their childhoods and respond in faith. Some read the gospel story in the pages of the Bible and are drawn to Jesus.

I have friends who have come to faith in Christ through tragic and desperate circumstances – in prisons, homeless shelters, hospital rooms, and the list goes on. The light of the gospel shone on them in the midst of some very dark situations. Still others have heard the good news from friends, relatives, neighbors, coworkers, roommates, teammates, or a stranger on a street corner.

While the gospel comes to each of us differently, the message is the same: We're all sinners separated from a holy God. Because of our sin, we're under a death sentence, and we can't fix the problem by simply trying to be good. But out of his great love for us, God sent his Son, Jesus, to pay the penalty for our sins. Jesus died on the cross to reconcile us to God, and he was raised from the dead to give us new life in him. If we accept Jesus by faith, God forgives our sins and promises us eternal life. That's good news! And that's the message of the gospel.

*Jesus died on the cross to reconcile us to God,
and he was raised from the dead to give us new life in him. . . .
That's good news!*

Have you had a gospel encounter? (Maybe you just did!) Did it lead you to place your faith in Jesus Christ or at least begin a journey toward faith? Whether your encounter with the gospel is fresh in your mind or tucked away in some dusty corner of your memory, it's your story, and it's unique.

The truth is, I could write a book about all the unique gospel encounters I've heard of over the years (maybe I will someday). But the purpose of this e-book is to give you a basic working knowledge of the gospel message and a deeper understanding of what God has done for you in Christ. For those of you who already have a firm grasp of the gospel, I hope this fresh encounter will breathe new life into your walk with Christ.

You may be wondering why we need another book about the gospel when there's plenty of good literature on the topic already. After all, what more is there to say? As King Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 1:9, "There's nothing new under the sun," so why go back over old ground? Good questions, and if you'll hang with me a bit longer, I'll explain.

You see, my gospel encounter began under a little tree at camp on a hot summer night in 1994, but it didn't end there. Gospel stories never do. That encounter was only the beginning. But what was coming for me was more than I had bargained for. I went home to my church and shared with everyone what Jesus had done in my heart and how I had responded to the gospel. Then I got back to living my sixteen-year-old life. I didn't spend much time thinking about God. I didn't invest much energy learning about him, reading the Bible, or growing in my faith. That was too much work, and in my mind there didn't seem to be much of a point. After all, I was already "in the family," so what more was there to being a Christian?

At the time, I fell into a common trap I've seen others fall into many times since: I began to think of my gospel encounter as a kind of ceremonial rite of passage, like a high school graduation. I had walked across the stage (or down the aisle), had received my diploma (or the saving grace of Jesus), and was now on my way to live my life without looking back.

What happened next wasn't unpredictable. The truth is, not much happened at all. I stumbled my way through those early days of my newfound faith. Spiritual growth came slowly, if it came at all. Spiritual disciplines, such as praying and reading my Bible, were tough to establish. I tried hard but couldn't do them consistently. And sharing my faith with friends and family members was too intimidating, not to mention that I really didn't understand much of it myself yet. Loving people as Christ loved them and walking in the power of God's Spirit weren't coming easy either.

I attended church and really liked the people, but my faith was, as it is for so many Christians, a recreational faith—a sort of hobby I dabbled in. Saying it that way is a bit discouraging, even today, but that’s what it became. Beyond that, though, something bigger was occurring that I wouldn’t spot until a few years later: I had gladly trusted Jesus to save me from my sins, but I wasn’t developing the kind of love for him that the Bible described. My relationship with God was stagnant, and that made spiritual disciplines like praying, reading my Bible, and attending church a bit more of a chore than they really ought to have been. I realize now that my stagnant relationship with God was more about me than him. I was going through the motions, doing all the right things, but somehow I had lost connection with Jesus and that gospel encounter I’d had with him at camp.

I had trusted Jesus to save me and had committed my life to him, but my faith wasn’t the joy-filled, growing relationship with God that I’d heard others talk about. I wondered if there was something wrong with me. Maybe I hadn’t done “it” right. Maybe my prayer of faith didn’t take. I wondered whether this life of spiritual stagnancy would continue. Thankfully, it didn’t. And for that I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the visionary son of a bootlegger in Lynchburg, Virginia.

Gospel Reminders

Through some painful and divinely influenced experiences—like outright disobeying God’s prompting, suffering through a bout with mononucleosis, and nearly failing out of Penn State University—I ended up at Jerry Falwell’s Liberty University in the fall of 1997, ready to pursue God while getting my education. (If you haven’t guessed it yet, Dr. Falwell was the son of that bootlegger in Lynchburg.)

A wonderful thing happened during that time: En route to my bachelor’s degree, I found that deep, rich love for Jesus I’d been looking for. To this day I believe that’s the main reason God led me to LU (that, and meeting my wonderful wife). But that love for Jesus didn’t come because of a class I took or a book I read. The remedy for me was so much bigger yet simpler than all of that. God used my time at Liberty—the professors who guided me, the vision of Dr. Falwell and his larger-than-life dreams about what God would do with people who surrendered to him, and the godly, young men who had become my friends—to *remind* me of the things about my faith that were primary. They were the things of “first importance” that the apostle Paul wrote about in 1 Corinthians 15:1–4:

I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you

received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word 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 in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, [and] that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures.* (Emphasis added)

Through these “gospel reminders,” a profound change took place in my heart. I understood and appreciated in new ways what Jesus had accomplished for me, and this fresh understanding stirred my heart to love and worship him. I saw myself for who I really was – not a pretty good guy whom God was blessed to have on his team, but an absolute wreck apart from his free gift of grace. Reading and studying my Bible became a joy rather than a chore, and I was growing in my knowledge of the Scriptures. But it wasn’t some “new” information that brought about this transformation. What made all the difference was continually returning to those things of “first importance,” alongside other gospel pilgrims who were also growing in their faith and developing that same love for God.

I’ve found that a lot of good people in churches today are locked in that same cycle of “mechanical” religious devotion I fell into, if you can even call it that. I know my story isn’t an isolated one. Many of my friends and, I suspect, many of you have been exactly where I was: in need of gospel reminders. Maybe that’s why you’re reading this book, hoping it might ignite a spark that will get you moving in the right direction, back toward a vibrant relationship with the Jesus you first encountered in the gospel. If so, this e-book is for you.

Even if you haven’t had a gospel encounter, this e-book is for you, too. The gospel is for all of us, rookies and veterans alike!

As we turn our attention to those things of “first importance” that the apostle Paul talked about and encounter the beautiful gospel of Jesus, my prayer is that you would develop a deep sense of gratitude for the work God’s Son accomplished for you, and that the good news would ignite – or reignite – faith in your heart. Don’t stop reading now. This encounter with the gospel just might change everything!

Chapter 1

What Exactly Is the Good News?

As I mentioned earlier, I'm a church kid, born and raised. I've been in and around the church my entire life. I've participated in all the Sunday-school classes and church youth groups and missions trips. Maybe you have, too. My church friends (the "churchies") and I were part of a fun little fraternity growing up. In between the Goldfish crackers, the puppet shows, and the silly songs, we were soaking up some really important elements of the faith. We learned early on that the answer to every Sunday-school teacher's question was Jesus, the Bible, or God. And as the years passed, we inherently knew that the word *gospel* meant "the good news." We picked up on these core pieces of our faith very quickly. With passion and enthusiasm, every little evangelist who grows up in the church is equipped with this very basic definition: The gospel is the good news. Period.

The Greek word for "gospel" is *euangelion*, which means "good news" or "good message." But what exactly does the "good news" mean? Why is it good news? For whom is it good? And what makes it good? Excellent questions! Let's see if we can find some answers.

Good News or Bad News?

In the fall of 2009, the New York Yankees played in their 321st World Series against the Philadelphia Phillies. (That's a slight exaggeration, but the pain and frustration over the outcome of that matchup have clouded my memory.) Hideki Matsui, New York's power-hitting outfielder, had a night for the ages, going three for four and driving in six of the Yankees' seven runs. Thanks to Matsui, the Bombers closed out the Fall Classic without breaking a sweat. When the dust settled that evening, the Yankees had defeated the Phillies 7-3 and hoisted the World Series trophy for the twenty-seventh time. Matsui, the series' MVP, took a ride around the field on his teammates' shoulders, grinning from ear to ear. There was much rejoicing, partying, and fanfare in the city affectionately known as the Big Apple. This was good news!

But just two hours south on I-95, in the City of Brotherly Love, Phillies' fans were having a very different reaction. The Phillies' hopes for a second World Series title in as many years had come to a screeching halt at the hands of Matsui. Their postseason run

was over, and they walked off into the night having fallen short yet again. To Phillies' fans (including this author), the Yankees' victory wasn't good news. It was a horrible but familiar fate for the Phillies — all hope and promise but no delivery. (It's difficult, but I'll spare you the boring details of other disappointments I've endured with Philadelphia sports teams over the years.) The point is this: Good news is subjective. We can't know whether news is good or bad for us unless we have enough information.

It's the same with the gospel. If we define the gospel merely as "the good news," we aren't providing enough information for others to know what that really means. Our Sunday-school definition may be a handy, concise description of the gospel, but it's entirely too narrow and limited to give people a clear grasp of what the gospel is all about and how it applies to their lives. But how can we define the gospel more clearly so that people will understand it, see that it really is good for them, and take a step or two closer to faith? How can we help others see that the good news can flow straight from the pages of the Bible into their lives?

One way is to expand the definition of *gospel*, to present it in broader terms so that people will not only grasp the big picture but will also understand why the gospel is good news for them personally. With that in mind, I'd like to offer this expanded definition: The gospel is the good news of what God did in Christ on my behalf.

Now that we have a broader definition to work with, let's explore it in depth and find out what it means for us personally.

The gospel is the good news of what God did in Christ on my behalf.

It's All about God

The first thing we need to understand about the gospel is this: It isn't about us, even though we benefit from it. It's about what God has done. If we're honest, in the church we typically think of the gospel as something we *believe*. It's an idea or a concept that unlocks grace and forgiveness when we accept it by faith. But if we aren't careful, we may miss the truth that this good news of Jesus isn't only about something we believe; it's about something God has done — a beautiful and grace-filled work we're privileged to benefit from. Regardless of our awareness of it, or our faith in it, the good news is still about what God has done.

It's important to remember (or to realize for the first time) that the gospel wasn't plan B for God. He never had an "Oh no!" moment that we all have when our first choice blows up in our faces. There was no emergency council of the Trinity (God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) to figure out what to do after Adam and Eve ate the forbidden

fruit in the garden (Genesis 3). God's plan from the very beginning was to send his only Son to die in our place as a spotless sacrifice for our sin (our failure to measure up to his perfect standards). The apostle Paul wrote about this divine plan in his letter to Timothy:

[God] has saved us and called us to a holy life – *not because of anything we have done but because of his own purpose and grace. This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time*, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 1:9–10, NIV, emphasis added)

As difficult as it is for us to wrap our minds around, this was God's sovereign plan before Adam and Eve ever came on the scene, and God was "pleased" to execute it (1 Corinthians 1:21). In fact, this perfect plan of redemption forms the story line of all the Scriptures.

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As God revealed his Word – the Bible – to us, he shared it in the framework of this plan. God, the righteous and holy Creator, promised his wayward children that our acts of rebellion (or sin) and the consequences of our disobedience wouldn't hold us in bondage forever. He would raise up a Deliverer, Judge, Prophet, and King to free us once for all from the penalty of sin and self-worship. This beautiful plan, revealed in the pages of the Bible and foreshadowed in Genesis 3:15, was fulfilled in the person and work of Jesus.

The gospel tells us that God himself did the work of saving us, and you know what? We needed him to do it! That's what makes the gospel *good* news. Because every one of us (the entire human race) is utterly incapable of fixing our sinful condition!

It's culturally and politically incorrect to say this, but I'll take the plunge anyway: The Bible teaches that we were born sinful, broken people (Psalm 51:5). Ephesians 2:1 says that we were "dead in . . . trespasses and sins." Our sin has separated us from a holy (pure and perfect) and righteous (just and upright) God (Colossians 1:21; 2:13–14). Not only are we separated from God because of our sin; we're as far away from him as

we can possibly fathom, “without hope and without God in the world” (Ephesians 2:12).

The Greek word for “sin” (*hamartanō*) literally means “to miss the mark.” It describes someone who shoots an arrow at a bull’s-eye but misses not only the bull’s-eye but the entire target. (This is pretty much what happened the first time I ever shot an arrow. But the dog wasn’t injured that badly – and she recovered quickly!)

We often see ourselves as pretty good people, don’t we? With our good intentions and morally good deeds, we figure we just need a little help to reach the mark of God’s holiness, or perfection – like my two-year-old son who needs a boost to reach the sink at night to brush his teeth. We tend to think that we just need a boost, a lift, a little help to close the gap between us and God. How foolish and deluded a thought! Instead, we ought to think of ourselves as shipwrecked souls marooned on a tiny, deserted island in the middle of a vast sea, and God as the mainland a million miles away from us.

We find ourselves not needing a “boost” but totally depending on someone to pluck us off this isolated island. We’re lost and hopeless, desperately needing to find some way back home. But the truth is, on our own *we can’t get there from here*. As humans, we’re all in the same condition – dead in trespasses and sins, wandering in our own stupidity and rebellion, pursuing not our God and his desires but our own sinful lusts and passions (Ephesians 2:3). But just as we’re about to give up hope on that isolated island, languishing in the darkest conditions, God intervenes. The apostle Paul put it this way:

You were dead in the trespasses and sins in which you once walked, following the course of this world, following the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that is now at work in the sons of disobedience – among whom we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, carrying out the desires of the body and the mind, and were by nature children of wrath, like the rest of mankind. (Ephesians 2:1–3)

Quite a grim picture, isn’t it? A picture of hopelessness, desperation, and need – until God acts on our behalf.

Why is it important to remember God’s work in the gospel? Because we had no legitimate hope of doing anything about our “helpless estate,” as the hymn writer expressed so powerfully.¹ Into our brokenness and darkness came the glorious light of

the gospel—the message of God’s plan for redeeming the human race, rescuing us from our hopeless, desperate condition as sinners. God dreamed up this plan and brought it to life in Christ. The gospel is about the work God alone accomplished on our behalf.

Into our brokenness and darkness came the glorious light of the gospel—the message of God’s plan for redeeming the human race, rescuing us from our hopeless, desperate condition as sinners.

Jesus Is the Only Way

To understand the good news, it’s also important to remember—or learn for the first time—that what God did on our behalf, he chose to do in Christ. Jesus is the only way we can be reconciled (brought back into a peaceful relationship) with God. God’s plan wasn’t a choose-your-own-adventure novel with multiple routes to the same end. To return to the example of being stranded on that deserted island, there aren’t a few dozen seaworthy vessels waiting to carry us safely to the mainland. God has provided only one way to get there.

Jesus boldly declared, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me” (John 14:6). This may offend our anything-goes cultural sensitivities today, but this is the biblical plan of salvation. In his grace and goodness, God chose to deliver, or rescue, us through one person: Jesus Christ.

God chose to deliver, or rescue, us through one person: Jesus Christ.

A quick scan of the Old Testament alone shows us that God has repeatedly chosen to work through one person—a single man, leader, head, or deliverer—to accomplish his purposes:

- Adam was the “head” of the human race, and in his single act of disobedience, he brought all of humanity under the curse of sin and death (Romans 5:12–19).
- Noah was the head of his family, and through him, they were all saved from the flood and given a new world to fill and populate (Genesis 6:9–9:1).
- Abraham was the recipient of the covenant God established to bless all the nations of the earth (Genesis 12:2–3; 17:1–7). Abraham was declared righteous because he placed his faith in God (Romans 4:3), and he became the father of all who believe in Christ (Romans 4:11; Galatians 3:29).

- Joseph was God’s point man and deliverer in a time of famine when his father, Jacob, sent Joseph’s brothers to Egypt in search of food. God preserved and protected his people through Joseph (Genesis 41:56 – 42:3; 43:4–8; 44:4–5) so that they flourished and became a great nation.
- Moses was the deliverer the Hebrew slaves had prayed for as they groaned and struggled under the weight of their slavery in Egypt (Exodus 2:23–25; 3:9–10).
- Moses was also a prophet who spoke God’s words to the Israelites (Exodus 24:1–3), a priest who interceded on their behalf before God (Exodus 32:11–14), and the mediator of the Law, who revealed God’s righteous standards to them (Exodus 20:1–22).
- Joshua, whose name means “savior,” was the point man through whom God led his people into the Promised Land (Joshua 1:1–9).
- The judges of Israel were a succession of deliverers whom God raised up to liberate his people from oppression (Judges 2:16–19).
- David was a man after God’s own heart (1Samuel 13:14), the king God sent into battle to deliver God’s people from their enemies and bring them unity and prosperity (2 Samuel 7 – 8).

All of this fascinates me. First, it shows me that God was working through his representatives, deliverers, judges, kings, and prophets to carry out his plan for his people. And this plan, regardless of cultural or political trends, moved on unhindered by circumstances. This gives us hope that in the chaotic and unpredictable world in which we find ourselves, God’s plan will still be brought to completion, no matter what.

Second, each of these examples provides us with a pattern, a “type” as theologians like to call it, that points us to God’s plan to rescue humanity through his Son, Jesus. Through that one sinless Man, the free gift of God’s grace shattered the darkness of sin and “ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). In stark contrast to Jesus stands the first man, Adam, who rebelled against God. In Romans 5 we see the consequences of Adam’s act of disobedience compared with the results of Jesus’ act of obedience:

As one trespass led to condemnation for all men, so one act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all men. For as by the one man’s [Adam’s] disobedience the many were made sinners, so by the one man’s [Christ’s]

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