

The Talmid



Talmid תלמיד a Hebrew word that means “a true disciple who desires to be what the Rabbi Jesus is.”

Whoever claims to live in Him must walk as Jesus did. 1 John 2:6 (NIV)

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STUDY TO SHEW THYSELF APPROVED UNTO GOD, A WORKMAN THAT NEEDETH NOT TO BE ASHAMED, RIGHTLY
DIVIDING THE WORD OF TRUTH. 2 TIMOTHY 2:15



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What is the gospel of Jesus Christ? Part 1

You'd think that would be an easy question to answer, especially for Christians. In fact, you'd think that writing an article like this—one asking Christians to think carefully about the question, what is the gospel of Jesus?—would be completely unnecessary. It's like asking carpenters to sit around and ponder the question, what is a hammer?

After all, the gospel of Jesus Christ stands at the very center of Christianity, and we Christians claim to be about the gospel above all else. It's what we intend to found our lives upon and build our churches around. It's what we speak to others about, and it's what we pray they also will hear and believe.

For all that, how firm a grasp do you think most Christians really have on the content of the Christian gospel? How would you answer if someone asked you: What is this news that you Christians go on and on about? And what's so good about it?

My sense is that far too many Christians would answer with something far short of what the Bible holds out as “the gospel of Jesus Christ.” Maybe they'd answer, “The gospel is that God will forgive your sins if you believe in him.” Or they'd say something like, “The good news is that God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.” Or, “The gospel is that you are a child of God, and God wants his children to be abundantly successful in every way.” Some would know that it's important to say something about Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection, but then again, how does all that fit in?

The fact is, getting Christians to agree on an answer to the question, what is the gospel? is not as simple as it should be. I work with a ministry called The Talmid, a ministry affiliated with West Los Angeles Living Word Christian Center in Los Angeles, California. For the most part, those who read and comment on our material are from a pretty narrow slice of evangelical Christianity. They believe the Bible is true and inerrant, they believe Jesus died on the cross and rose bodily from the dead, they believe human beings are sinners in need of salvation, and they intend to be gospel-centered, gospel-saturated people.

But what would you guess is the topic that single-handedly generates the

most comment and the most energetic response of anything we write on? Yep, it's the gospel. We can write and speak for months about preaching, discipling, counseling, church polity, even church music, and the response from our readers is interesting but not surprising. But let us post an article trying to be clear about what the Bible teaches is the good news of Christianity, and the response is stunning.

Some time ago, one of my friends posted a short article on our website about a well-known Christian artist who had been asked in an interview to define what the good news of Christianity is. Here's what the artist said:

“What a great question. I guess I'd probably ... my instinct is to say that it's Jesus coming, living, dying, and being resurrected and his inaugurating the already and the not yet of all things being restored to himself ... and that happening by way of himself ... the being made right of all things ... that process both beginning and being a reality in the lives and hearts of believers and yet a day coming when it will be more fully realized. But the good news, the gospel, the speaking of the good news, I would say is the news of his kingdom coming, the inaugurating of his kingdom coming ... that's my instinct.”

Several of us responded by asking questions such as, “If we're articulating the Christian gospel, shouldn't we include some *explanation* of Jesus' death and resurrection?” Or, “Shouldn't we say something about sin and the need for salvation from God's wrath against it?”

The response to that series was incredible. For literally months, we received dozens of messages about it. Some who wrote to us appreciated the questions we raised; others wondered what was wrong with articulating the gospel like that since Jesus preached about the arrival of the kingdom. Others were just refreshed to hear Christians thinking hard about how to articulate the gospel in the first place.

In some ways, I'm glad to see Christians getting excited when a discussion about the gospel begins. It means they're taking it seriously, and that they have deeply held thoughts about what the gospel is. There would be nothing healthy at all in Christians who couldn't care less how we define and understand the gospel. On the other hand, I think the energy generated by discussions about the gospel points to a general fog of confusion that swirls around it

these days. When you come right down to it, Christians just don't agree on what the gospel is—even Christians who call themselves evangelical.

Ask any hundred self-professed evangelical Christians what the good news of Jesus is, and you're likely to get about sixty different answers. Listen to evangelical preaching, read evangelical books, log on to evangelical websites, and you'll find one description after another of the gospel, many of them mutually exclusive.

Here are a few I've found:

“The good news is; God wants to show you his incredible favor. He wants to fill your life with “new wine,” but are you willing to get rid of your old wineskins? Will you start thinking bigger? Will you enlarge your vision and get rid of those old negative mind-sets that hold you back?”

“Here's the gospel in a phrase. Because Christ died for us, those who trust in him may know that their guilt has been pardoned once and for all. What will we have to say before the bar of God's judgment? Only one thing. Christ died in my place. That's the gospel.”

“The message of Jesus may well be called the most revolutionary of all time: “The radical revolutionary empire of God is here, advancing by reconciliation and peace, expanding by faith, hope, and love—beginning with the poorest, the weakest, the meekest, and the least. It's time to change your thinking. Everything is about to change. It's time for a new way of life. Believe me. Follow me. Believe this good news so you can learn to live by it and be part of the revolution.”

“The good news is that God's face will always be turned toward you, regardless of what you have done, where you have been, or how many mistakes you've made. He loves you and is turned in your direction, looking for you.”

“The gospel itself refers to the proclamation that Jesus, the crucified and risen Messiah, is the one, true, and only Lord of the world.”

“Good news! God is becoming King and he is doing it through Jesus! And therefore, *phew!* God's justice, God's peace, God's world is going to be renewed. And in the middle of that, of course, it's good news for you and me. But that's the derivative from, or the corollary of the

good news which is a message about Jesus that has a second-order effect on me and you and us. But the gospel is not itself about *you are this sort of a person and this can happen to you*. That's the result of the gospel rather than the gospel itself.... Salvation is *the result of* the gospel, not the center of the gospel itself."

"The gospel is the proclamation of Jesus, in [two] senses. It is the proclamation *announced* by Jesus—the arrival of God's realm of possibility (his "kingdom") in the midst of human structures of possibility. But it is also the proclamation *about* Jesus—the good news that in dying and rising, Jesus has made the kingdom he proclaimed available to us."

"As a Christian, I am simply trying to orient myself around living a particular kind of way, the kind of way that Jesus taught is possible. And I think that the way of Jesus is the best possible way to live.... Over time when you purposefully try to live the way of Jesus, you start noticing something deeper going on. You begin realizing the reason this is the best way to live is that it is rooted in profound truths about how the world is. You find yourself living more and more in tune with ultimate reality. You are more and more in sync with how the universe is at its deepest levels.... The first Christians announced this way of Jesus as "the good news."

"My understanding of Jesus' message is that he teaches us to live in the reality of God now—here and today. It's almost as if Jesus just keeps saying, "Change your life. Live this way."

You see what I mean when I say the gospel is surrounded by a fog of confusion! If you had never heard of Christianity, what would you think after reading those few quotations? You'd obviously know that Christians intend to be communicating some message that is good. But beyond that, it's just a jumble. Is the good news simply that God loves me, and that I need to start thinking more positively? Is it that Jesus is a really good example who can teach me to live a loving and compassionate life? It might have something to do with sin and forgiveness. Apparently some Christians think this good news has something to do with Jesus' death. Others apparently don't.

My point is not to decide here and now which of these quotations are better or worse than the others (though I hope that after reading this series of teachings you'll be able to decide). It's simply to point out how many different things come to people's minds when they're asked, what is the gospel?

I want to try in this teaching to offer a clear answer to that question, one that is based on what the Bible itself teaches about the gospel. In the process, I am hoping and praying for several things.

First, if you are a Christian, I pray that this little teaching—and more importantly, the glorious truths it attempts to articulate—will cause your heart to swell with joy and praise toward Jesus Christ for what he has accomplished for you. An emaciated gospel leads to emaciated worship. It lowers our eyes from God to self and cheapens what God has accomplished for us in Christ. The biblical gospel, by contrast, is like fuel in the furnace of worship. The more you understand about it, believe it, and rely on it, the more you adore God both for who he is and for what he has done for us in Christ. **"Oh, the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God!" Paul cried ([Romans 11:33](#))**, and it was because his heart was full of the gospel.

Second, I hope that reading this series of teachings will give you a deeper confidence as you talk to others about the good news of Jesus. I have met any number of Christians who hesitate to share the gospel with friends, family, and acquaintances for fear of not having answers to all their questions. Well, it's probably true, no matter who you are, that you'll never be able to answer *all* the questions! But you *can* answer *some* of them, and I hope this teaching will help you answer *more* of them.

Third, I pray that you will see the importance of this gospel for the life of the church, and that as a result you will work to make sure that this gospel is preached, sung, prayed, taught, proclaimed, and heard in every aspect of your church's life. It is through the church, Paul says, that the manifold wisdom of God will be made known to the universe. And how is that? Through the preaching of the gospel, which brings to light **"for everyone"** God's eternal plan to save the world ([Ephesians 3:7–12](#)).

Fourth, I hope this teaching will help to shore up the edges of the gospel in your mind and heart. The gospel is a stark message, and it intrudes into the world's thinking and priorities with sharp, bracing truths. Sadly, there has always been a tendency among Christians—even among evangelicals—to soften some of those edg-

es so that the gospel will be more readily acceptable to the world. One of my prayers is that this teaching will serve to preserve those edges and prevent the erosion of truths that, though hard for the world to swallow, are indispensable to the good news of Jesus. All of us are tempted, in the name of being winsome witnesses, to present the gospel in as attractive a way as possible. That's fine in some respects—it is “good news,” after all—but we must also be careful not to round off the gospel's sharp points. We must preserve the edges, and I hope this teaching will help us to do that.

Finally, if you're not a Christian, then I pray that by reading this series of articles you will be provoked to think hard about the good news of Jesus Christ. This is the message on which we Christians have staked our entire lives, and it's one that we believe demands a response from you, too. If there's anything in the world that you cannot afford to ignore, it is the voice of God saying, “Good news! Here is how you can be saved from my judgment!” That's the kind of announcement that demands attention.

FINDING THE GOSPEL IN THE BIBLE

Did you know that GPS navigation systems are causing havoc in towns across the United States? That's especially the case in small towns. For people who live in large cities, the little machines are lifesavers. Plug the GPS in, type in an address, and you're off to the races. No more missed exits, no more wrong turns—just you, your car, your GPS, and ding! “Arriving at destination!”

Listen to the following testimony by Greg Gilbert: “I just recently got my first GPS device, which was primarily an act of defiance against whoever is responsible for the almost impossible road system in Washington DC. My first experience with it, though, wasn't in Washington. It was in Linden, Texas, my very small, very rural, and very out-of-the-way hometown.

It turns out that my GPS has no problem whatsoever navigating the crisscrossing, back-and-forth streets of Washington. Oddly enough, though, it did have trouble in Linden. Roads that the GPS was quite certain existed, didn't. Turns that it insisted were possible, weren't. Addresses that it firmly believed would be in a certain place, turned out to be

several hundred yards further down the street—or even nonexistent.

Apparently GPS systems' ignorance of small towns is a growing problem. ABC News ran a story about neighborhood roads that have literally become commercial thoroughfares because GPS systems are routing traffic there, rather than along larger highways. There are other problems, too. One poor guy from California insisted he was only following his GPS's instructions when he made a right turn onto a rural road and found himself stuck on a train track, staring into the headlight of an oncoming locomotive! He survived. His rental car, though, and presumably the offending GPS along with it, didn't make out so well.

One representative from the American Automobile Association was sympathetic—kind of. “Clearly the GPS failed him in the sense it should not have been telling him to make a right turn on the railroad tracks,” he said. “But just because a machine tells you to do something that is potentially dangerous, doesn't mean you should do it.” Indeed!

So what's going on? GPS manufacturers say the problem isn't with the devices themselves. They're doing exactly what they're supposed to do. Instead, the problem is in the maps the devices are downloading. It turns out that especially for small towns, the maps available to GPS systems are often several years, or even decades, out of date. Sometimes the maps are nothing better than planning maps—what city planners *intended* to do if their towns grew. The result? Sometimes addresses that show up in one place on the planning maps ended up being somewhere else when the town was actually built. Sometimes roads that city planners intended to build never actually got built—and sometimes they got built not as roads at all, but as railroads!

In the world of GPS, as in life, it's important that you get your information from a reliable source!”

What's Our Authority?

The same thing is true when we approach the question, What is the gospel? Right at the beginning, we have to make some sort of decision about what source of information we're going to use in order to answer the question. For evangelicals, the answer usually comes pretty easily: we find the answer in the Bible.

That's true, but it's useful to know up front that not everyone agrees entirely with that answer. Different “Christian” traditions have given a number of different answers to this question of authority. Some have ar-

gued, for instance, that we ought to base our understanding of the gospel not solely, or even primarily, on the words of the Bible, but on Christian tradition. If the church has believed something for long enough, they argue, we should understand it to be true. Others have said that we know truth through the use of reason. Building our knowledge from the ground up—A leads to B leads to C leads to D—will bring us to a true understanding of ourselves, the world, and God. Still others say we should look for the truth of the gospel in our own experience. Whatever resonates most with our own hearts is what we finally understand to be true about ourselves and God.

If you spend enough time thinking about it, though, you realize that each of those three potential sources of authority ultimately fails to deliver what it promises. Tradition leaves us relying on nothing more than the opinions of men. Reason, as any freshman philosopher will tell you, leaves us flailing about in skepticism. (Try to *prove*, for example, that you're not just a figment of someone else's imagination, or that your five senses really are reliable.) And experience leaves us relying on our own fickle hearts in order to decide what is true—a prospect most honest people find unsettling at best.

What do we do, then? Where do we go in order to know what is true, and therefore what the good news of Jesus Christ really is? As Christians, we believe that God has spoken to us in his Word, the Bible. Furthermore, we believe that what God has said in the Bible is infallibly and inerrantly true, and therefore it leads us not to skepticism or despair or uncertainty, but to confidence. **“All Scripture is breathed out by God,”** Paul said, **“and profitable for teaching”** ([2 Timothy 3:16](#)).

King David wrote,

Psalm 18:30 (NASB)

³⁰ **“As for God, His way is blameless; The word of the LORD is tried; He is a shield to all who take refuge in Him.”**

And so it is to God's Word that we look in order to find what he has said to us about his Son Jesus and about the good news of the gospel.

Where in the Bible Do We Go?

But where do we go in the Bible to find that? I suppose there are several different approaches we could take. One would be to look at all the occur-

rences of the word *gospel* in the New Testament and try to come to some sort of conclusion about what the writers mean when they use the word. Surely there are a few instances where the writers are careful to define it.

There could be important things to learn from this approach, but there are drawbacks, too. One is that often in the New Testament a writer obviously intends to give a summary of the good news of Christianity, yet he doesn't use the word *gospel* at all. Take Peter's sermon at Pentecost in [Acts 2](#), for example. If ever there was a proclamation of the good news of Christianity, surely this is it—yet Peter never mentions the word *gospel*. Another example is the apostle John, who uses the word only once in all his New Testament writings ([Revelation 14:6](#))!

Revelation 14:6 (NASB)

⁶ **“And I saw another angel flying in midheaven, having an eternal gospel to preach to those who live on the earth, and to every nation and tribe and tongue and people.”**

Let me suggest that, for now, we approach the task of defining the main contours of the Christian gospel not by doing a word study, but by looking at what the earliest Christians said about Jesus and the significance of his life, death, and resurrection. If we look at the apostles' writings and sermons in the Bible, we'll find them explaining, sometimes very briefly and sometimes at greater length, what they learned from Jesus himself about the good news. Perhaps we'll also be able to discern some common set of questions, some shared framework of truths around which the apostles and early Christians structured their presentation of the good news of Jesus.

The Gospel in Romans 1–4

One of the best places to start looking for a basic explanation of the gospel is Paul's letter to the [Romans](#). Perhaps more clearly than any other book of the Bible, [Romans](#) contains a deliberate, step-by-step expression of what Paul understood to be the good news.

Actually, the book of [Romans](#) is not so much a *book* at all, at least as we usually think of books. It's a letter, a way for Paul to introduce himself and his message to a group of Christians he had never met. That's why it has such a systematic, step-by-step feel. Paul wanted these Christians to know about him, his ministry, and especially his message. He wanted them to know that the good news he preached was the same good news they believed.

“I am not ashamed of the gospel,” he begins, **“for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes”** ([Romans 1:16](#)). From there, especially through the first four chapters, Paul explains the good news about Jesus in wonderful detail. As we look at these chapters, we’ll see that Paul structures his presentation of the gospel around a few critical truths, truths that show up again and again in the apostles’ preaching of the gospel. Let’s look at the progression of Paul’s thought in [Romans 1–4](#).

First, Paul tells his readers that it is God to whom they are accountable. After his introductory remarks in [Romans 1:1–7](#), Paul begins his presentation of the gospel by declaring that **“the wrath of God is revealed from heaven”** ([v. 18](#)).

With his very first words, Paul insists that humanity is not autonomous. We did not create ourselves, and we are neither self-reliant nor self-accountable. No, it is God who created the world and everything in it, including us. Because he created us, God has the right to demand that we worship him. Look what Paul says in [verse 21](#): **“For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened.”**

Thus Paul indicts humanity: they have sinned by not honoring and thanking God. It is our obligation, as people created and owned by God, to give him the honor and glory that is due to him, to live and speak and act and think in a way that recognizes and acknowledges his authority over us. We are made by him, owned by him, dependent on him, and therefore accountable to him. That’s the first point Paul labors to make as he explains the good news of Christianity.

Second, Paul tells his readers that their problem is that they rebelled against God. They—along with everyone else—did not honor God and give thanks to him as they should have. Their foolish hearts were darkened and they **“exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things”** ([v. 23](#)). That’s a truly revolting image, isn’t it? For human beings to consider their Creator and then decide that a wooden or metal image of a frog or a bird or even *themselves* is more glorious, more satisfying, and more valuable is the height of insult and rebellion against God. It is the root and essence of sin, and its results are nothing short of horrific.

For most of the next three chapters Paul presses this point, indicting all humanity as sinners against God. In [chapter 1](#) his focus is on the Gentiles, and then in [chapter 2](#) he turns just as strongly toward the Jews. It’s as if Paul knows that the most self-righteous of the Jews would have been applauding his lashing of the Gentiles, so he pivots on a dime in [2:1](#) and points his accusing finger at the applauders: **“Therefore you have no excuse”!** Just like Gentiles, he says, Jews have broken God’s law and are under his judgment.

Romans 2:1 (NASB)

¹**“Therefore you have no excuse, everyone of you who passes judgment, for in that which you judge another, you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.”**

By the middle of [chapter 3](#), Paul has indicted every single person in the world with rebellion against God. **“We have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin”** ([v. 9](#)). And his sobering conclusion is that when we stand before God the Judge, every mouth will be silenced. No one will mount a defense. Not one excuse will be offered. The whole world—Jew, Gentile, every last one of us—will be held fully accountable to God ([v. 19](#)).

Romans 3:19 (NASB)

¹⁹**“Now we know that whatever the Law says, it speaks to those who are under the Law, so that every mouth may be closed and all the world may become accountable to God.”**

Now, strictly speaking, these first two points are not really good news at all. In fact, they’re pretty *bad* news. That I have rebelled against the holy and judging God who made me is not a happy thought. But it is an important one, because it paves the way for the good news. That makes sense if you think about it. To have someone say to you, **“I’m coming to save you!”** is really not good news at all unless you believe you actually need to be saved.

Third, Paul says that God’s solution to humanity’s sin is the sacrificial death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Having laid out the bad news of the predicament we face as sinners before our righteous God, Paul turns now to the good news, the *gospel* of Jesus Christ.

“But now,” Paul says, in spite of our sin, **“now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law”** ([v. 21](#)).

Romans 3:21 (NASB)

²¹**“But now apart from the Law the righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets.”**

In other words, there is a way for human beings to be counted righteous before God instead of unrighteous, to be declared innocent instead of guilty, to be justified instead of condemned. And it has nothing to do with acting better or living a more righteous life. It comes **“apart from the law.”**

So how does it happen? Paul puts it plainly in [Romans 3:24](#). Despite our rebellion against God, and in the face of a hopeless situation, we can be **“justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus.”** Through Christ’s sacrificial death and resurrection—because of his blood and his life—sinners may be saved from the condemnation our sins deserve.

But there’s one more question Paul answers. Exactly how is that good news for me? How do *I* become included in this promised salvation?

Finally, Paul tells his readers how they themselves can be included in this salvation. That’s what he writes about through the end of [chapter 3](#) and on into [chapter 4](#). The salvation God has provided comes **“through faith in Jesus Christ,”** and it is **“for all who believe”** (3:22).

Romans 3:22 (NASB)

²² **“Even the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction.”**

So how does this salvation become good news for *me* and not just for someone else? How do *I* come to be included in it? By believing in Jesus Christ. By trusting him and no other to save me. **“To the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly,”** Paul explains, **“his faith is counted as righteousness”** ([Romans 4:5](#)).

Four Crucial Questions

Now, having looked at Paul’s argument in [Romans 1–4](#), we can see that at the heart of his proclamation of the gospel are the answers to four crucial questions:

1. Who made us, and to whom are we accountable?
2. What is our problem? In other words, are we in trouble and why?
3. What is God’s solution to that problem? How has he acted to save us from it?
4. How do I—myself, right here, right now—

how do *I* come to be included in that salvation? What makes this good news for me and not just for someone else?

We might summarize these four major points like this: **God, man, Christ, and response.**

Of course Paul goes on to unfold a universe of other promises God has made to those who are saved in Christ, and many of those promises may very appropriately be identified as part of the good news of Christianity, the gospel of Jesus Christ. But it’s crucial that we understand, right from the outset, that all those grand promises depend on and flow from this, the heart and fountainhead of the Christian good news. Those promises come only to those who are forgiven of sin through faith in the crucified and risen Christ. That is why Paul, when he presents the heart of the gospel, starts here—with these four critical truths.

The Gospel in the Rest of the New Testament

It’s not just Paul who does this. As I read the apostles’ writings throughout the New Testament, these are the four questions I see them answering over and over again. Whatever else they might say, these are the issues that seem to lie at the heart of their presentation of the gospel. Contexts change, angles change, words change, and approaches change, but somehow and in some way the earliest Christians *always* seem to get at these four issues: We are accountable to the God who created us. We have sinned against that God and will be judged. **But** God has acted in Jesus Christ to save us, and we take hold of that salvation by repentance from sin and faith in Jesus.

God. Man. Christ. Response.

Let’s take a look at some other passages in the New Testament where the gospel of Jesus is summarized. Take Paul’s famous words in [1 Corinthians 15](#), for example:

1 Corinthians 15:1-5 (NASB)

- ¹ **“Now I make known to you, brethren, the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received, in which also you stand,**
- ² **by which also you are saved, if you hold fast the word which I preached to you, unless you believed in vain.**
- ³ **For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures,**
- ⁴ **and that He was buried, and that He was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures,**
- ⁵ **and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve.**

Do you see the central structure there? Paul is not as expansive as he is in [Romans 1–4](#), but the main contours are still clear. Human beings are in trouble, sunk in “our sins” and in need of “being saved” (obviously, though implicitly, from God’s judgment). But salvation comes in this: “**Christ died for our sins ... was buried ... was raised.**” And all this is taken hold of by “**hold[ing] fast to the word I preached to you,**” by believing truly and not in vain. So there it is: **God, man, Christ, response.**

Even in the sermons recorded in the book of Acts, this central framework of the gospel is clear. When Peter tells the people at Pentecost what they should do in response to his proclamation of Jesus’ death and resurrection, he says, “**Repent and be baptized every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins**” ([Acts 2:38](#)). Again, Peter’s appeal is not expansive, and God’s judgment is again implicit, but it’s all there nonetheless. **The problem:** you need God to forgive your sins, not judge you for them. **The solution:** the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which Peter has already talked about at length in the sermon. **The necessary response:** repentance and faith, evidenced by the act of baptism.

In another sermon of Peter’s, in [Acts 3:18–19](#), these four crucial truths are obvious again:

[Acts 3:18-19 \(NASB\)](#)

¹⁸ “**But the things which God announced beforehand by the mouth of all the prophets, that His Christ would suffer, He has thus fulfilled.**”

¹⁹ “**Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord.**”

Problem: you need your sins wiped out, not judged by God.

Solution: Christ suffers.

Response: repent and turn to God in faith.

Or consider Peter preaching the gospel to Cornelius and his family:

[Acts 10:39-43 \(NASB\)](#)

³⁹ “**We are witnesses of all the things He did both in the land of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They also put Him to death by hanging Him on a cross.**

⁴⁰ **God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible,**

⁴¹ **not to all the people, but to witnesses who**

were chosen beforehand by God, that is, to us who ate and drank with Him after He arose from the dead.

⁴² **And He ordered us to preach to the people, and solemnly to testify that this is the One who has been appointed by God as Judge of the living and the dead.**

⁴³ **Of Him all the prophets bear witness that through His name everyone who believes in Him receives forgiveness of sins.”**

Forgiveness of sins. Through the name of the crucified and risen One. For everyone who believes.

Paul, too, preaches the same gospel in [Acts 13](#):

[Acts 13:38-39 \(NASB\)](#)

³⁸ “**Therefore let it be known to you, brethren, that through Him forgiveness of sins is proclaimed to you,**

³⁹ **and through Him everyone who believes is freed from all things, from which you could not be freed through the Law of Moses.”**

Once again, the clearly recognizable framework is **God, man, Christ, and response.** You need God to grant you “forgiveness of sins.” That happens “through Jesus,” and it happens for “everyone who believes.”

Explaining the Core Truths in a Variety of Ways

Obviously this **God-man-Christ-response** structure is not a slavish formula. The apostles don’t necessarily tick the points off like a checklist when they proclaim the gospel. Depending on the context, how long they have to preach, and who is included in their audience, they explain those four points at various lengths. Sometimes one or more of them are even left implicit rather than explicit—especially the fact that it is God to whom we are accountable and from whom we need the gift of forgiveness. But then again, that’s a fact that would already have been deep in the minds of the Jews to whom the apostles most often preached.

On the other hand, when Paul speaks to a group of pagan philosophers at the Areopagus, he starts right at the beginning, with God himself. Paul’s sermon in [Acts 17](#) is often cited as a model for preaching the good news to a pagan culture. But there’s something very interesting and unusual about that sermon. Look at it carefully and you start to realize that Paul doesn’t really proclaim the good news of Christ at all, just the bad news!

“Let me tell you about this unknown God to whom you have an altar,” he begins, in effect. Then he explains to them in [verses 24–28](#) that there is a God, that this God made the world, and that he calls us to worship him.

[Acts 17:24-28 \(NASB\)](#)

²⁴ “The God who made the world and all things in it, since He is Lord of heaven and earth, does not dwell in temples made with hands;
²⁵ nor is He served by human hands, as though He needed anything, since He Himself gives to all *people* life and breath and all things;
²⁶ and He made from one *man* every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined *their* appointed times and the boundaries of their habitation,
²⁷ that they would seek God, if perhaps they might grope for Him and find Him, though He is not far from each one of us;
²⁸ for in Him we live and move and exist, as even some of your own poets have said, ‘For we also are His children.’”

That established, he turns in [verse 29](#) to explain the concept of sin and its root in worship of created things rather than of God, and he declares that God will judge his hearers by the “man whom he has appointed,” a man whom God has raised from the dead ([v. 31](#)).

[Acts 17:29-31 \(NASB\)](#)

²⁹ “Being then the children of God, we ought not to think that the Divine Nature is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and thought of man.
³⁰ Therefore having overlooked the times of ignorance, God is now declaring to men that all *people* everywhere should repent,
³¹ because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead.”

And then he stops! Look at it closely. There’s no mention of forgiveness, no mention of the cross, and no promise of salvation—just a declaration of God’s demands and a proclamation of the resurrection as proof of his coming judgment! Paul doesn’t even mention Jesus’ name!

So what’s going on here? Does Paul *not* preach the gospel here? Well, no, not right then. There’s no gospel, no good news, in his public sermon. The

news Paul proclaims is all bad. But look at [verses 32–34](#), where the Bible says that the men wanted to hear Paul again, and that some of them eventually believed.

[Acts 17:32-34 \(NASB\)](#)

³² “Now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some *began* to sneer, but others said, ‘We shall hear you again concerning this.’
³³ So Paul went out of their midst.
³⁴ But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris and others with them.”

Apparently, Paul preached the *good* news—that sinners could be saved from this coming judgment—at some later time, perhaps publicly, perhaps privately.

Like the other apostles, Paul was perfectly able to present the core truths of the gospel in a variety of ways. But the important thing to understand is that there *were* in fact some core truths of the gospel, and from the sermons and letters preserved to us we have a very good idea of what those core truths were—and are. In [Romans](#), in [1 Corinthians](#), in the sermons of [Acts](#), and throughout the New Testament, the earliest Christians structured their declaration of the good news around a few critical truths.

First the bad news: God is your Judge, and you have sinned against him.

And then the gospel: but Jesus has died so that sinners may be forgiven of their sins if they will repent and believe in him.

Continued in next edition...

CORAM DEO (Before the face of God)

The New Testament is in the Old concealed; the Old Testament is in the New revealed.

—Augustine

[1 Peter 1:10-12 \(NASB\)](#)

¹⁰ “As to this salvation, the prophets who prophesied of the grace that *would come* to you made careful searches and inquiries,
¹¹ seeking to know what person or time the Spirit of Christ within them was indicating as He predicted the sufferings of Christ and the glories to follow.

¹² It was revealed to them that they were not

servicing themselves, but you, in these things which now have been announced to you through those who preached the gospel to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven—things into which angels long to look.”

Luke 24:22-27 (NASB)

²² “But also some women among us amazed us. When they were at the tomb early in the morning,
²³ and did not find His body, they came, saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said that He was alive.
²⁴ “Some of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just exactly as the women also had said; but Him they did not see.”
²⁵ And He said to them, “O foolish men and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken!”
²⁶ “Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?”
²⁷ Then beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures.”

The prophets searched. Angels longed to see. And the disciples didn’t understand. But Moses, the prophets, and all the Old Testament Scriptures had spoken about it—that Jesus would come, suffer, and then be glorified. God began to tell a story in the Old Testament, the ending of which the audience eagerly anticipated. But the Old Testament audience was left hanging. The plot was laid out but the climax was delayed. The unfinished story begged an ending.

In Christ, God has provided the climax to the Old Testament story. Jesus did not arrive unannounced; His coming was declared *in advance* in the Old Testament, not just in explicit prophecies of the Messiah but by means of the stories of all of the events, characters, and circumstances in the Old Testament. God was telling a larger, overarching, unified story. From the account of creation in Genesis to the final stories of the return from exile, God progressively unfolded His plan of salvation. And the Old Testament account of that plan always pointed in some way to Christ.



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Hebrews 12 – Overview

Part 4

Hebrews 12:4-11 – The Discipline of God (cont.)

In the last study two of the four issues in [Hebrews 12:4-11](#) were studied. The first issue was that if a believer is going to run the spiritual race with endurance, then they have to appreciate that God’s discipline will be a normal part of that process. It was also seen that God generally allows a Christian the opportunity to “self-correct” themselves when they venture outside of His will. The second issue that was addressed was that if a professing believer has never experienced the discipline of God in their life when they blatantly stray outside the boundaries of Scripture, chances are very good that they may not even be a Christian. Often times many people actually exploit God’s goodness by utilizing His love and forgiveness as a means to rationalize what they are doing.

In this study, the third and fourth issues of this section will be addressed.

ISSUE THREE:

The third issue involves forgetting the word of God. [Hebrews 12:5](#) says,
^{Heb 12:5} **And you have forgotten the exhortation which speaks to you as to sons: "My son, do not**

despise the chastening of the LORD, nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;

The Greek word for “**have forgotten**” is “*eklanthanomai*”. When the prefix “*ek*” is used, what it does is intensify the word. I.e., this is not just forgetting something, but rather it means to utterly forget. This is the only use of this particular word for forgetfulness in the Bible. The phrase “**have forgotten**” is in the perfect tense. The perfect tense represents something that happened in the past, but it still has a reference to the present. So, what this word implies is that the individual forgot somewhere along the way, but unfortunately that forgetfulness is still present. The application of this to a believer’s life should be fairly obvious. When God’s Word is neglected, it is forgotten, and when it is forgotten, it will be disobeyed. Spiritual neglect leads to spiritual disobedience. Obviously, there were some fundamental truths about God that these Hebrew Christians had forgotten. It seems that many Christians “**have forgotten**” some basic truths about God, and the corresponding result is that unfortunately God often has to chasten and discipline them to help them remember those basic truths. For instance, believers seem to forget that very often those who have loved God the most have also suffered the most. What many Christians want to hear is that those who have loved God the most will be blessed the most. Christians seem to forget that God’s chastening is the norm for the Christian life, not the exception. They want it to apply to everyone but themselves.

What [Hebrews 12:5](#) reveals is that there are two basic perils related to God’s discipline.

PERIL ONE: The first peril is that of despising God’s discipline, or taking it lightly. The word for “**despise**” is “*oligōreō*”, and it means to have little to no regard for something. It simply is not that important to the individual. It is a compound word that comes from two words – one means “to care” and the other means “little”. Literally, to care little for something. The NIV says “**do not make light of the Lord’s discipline**”. The NASB says “**do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord**”. The phrase “**do not despise**” or “**do not regard lightly**” is in the present imperative tense. It is a command for the believer to stop regarding God’s discipline in their life as being of little value. One of the reasons why some Christians often fall into sin so easily and so quickly is simply because they have forgotten that God will discipline them. That is not a good thing to forget. As much as God must disdain using adversity and hardship to remind His children to live a righteous life, the fact is that He will if He knows

that is what it takes in their life to get their attention.

The issue is really very simple. A person’s reaction to something cannot be right if their view of what is happening to them is not right. That is why children do not like taking medicine. Many Christians have almost become callous to God and His Word. They have ignored God’s Word and obedience to it for so long that they literally have become callous to what it is saying. They actually “**despise**” its demands on their life. It infringes on their lifestyle and on their personal agendas for their life. So, when God does discipline that individual, rather than softening them, God’s discipline actually hardens them. They actually resent God’s discipline in their life. They were not expecting it, did not want it, and they do not appreciate it.

It seems that the primary way that believers can recognize whether or not they may fit into this spiritual category is by seeing if they question and complain every time that something unpleasant begins to happen to them. At a personal level, a believer needs to be careful at this point simply because that which is unpleasant may actually be God’s chastening on their life. So, rather than enduring God’s discipline and learning from it, many believers just continue to grumble and complain. They think that God is being overly severe with them, He is not being fair, and His timing is not good, and generally that His discipline is undeserved. People simply want everything in life to be easy. In essence, they believe that they know more than God does. If that describes a person’s life, then most likely they are much more concerned with their physical life than their spiritual life, and in essence their priorities have been reversed.

PERIL TWO: The second peril is that of becoming “**discouraged**” because of God’s discipline. The second part of [Hebrews 12:5](#) says,

“...Nor be discouraged when you are rebuked by Him;”

The word “**discouraged**” is “*eklyō*” and it means to faint and to grow weary. It is the same word that was used in [Hebrews 12:3](#) when it said,

Heb 12:3 **For consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself, lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls.**

The word means to lose heart, to become faint, to give up, to give out, and to lose courage. Many people who have forsaken the Christian life because they became spiritually weary in having to run the race. It just was

not worth it to them to remain committed to Christ. It always seems much easier to just give up and quit.

Here is the issue. The true impact and force of these verses on discipline has become lost and meaningless to many in the Christian culture. Believers live in a culture of permissiveness. It is an age of doing what the person wants to do when they want to do it, and that perspective has certainly had its impact on the current church age. The problem with a permissive perspective and attitude is that it simply hates discipline. So, any kind of discipline becomes unacceptable. Americans have a government that has brought the culture to a place that a person can have their children taken away from them if they physically discipline them. However, from a biblical perspective pain and discomfort are a normal part of the teaching and discipline process. When a society removes discipline, it reaps rebellion – and the culture has seen plenty of that! Too often people wonder what happened to the kids, when in reality they would be better off wondering what happened to the parents. In a family, the goal of discipline and correction is to help children become responsible and mature, and the same is true of God’s discipline in the personal lives of believers.

God’s will for a believer’s life is very broad. It entails living righteously, being mature, being godly, being obedient, and being responsible. A basic principle of Scripture is that when the Christian’s life deviates from God’s best, He uses discipline to bring them back into alignment with His will for their life. The actual word “scourges” in [Hebrews 12:6](#) literally means “to whip”. It was something that was extremely painful. Discipline cannot be effective unless it is painful and unless it hurts. The point of that verse is really very simple. It is clearly revealing that God’s discipline can often times be very severe. When disobedience is severe, very often God’s discipline will be severe. Pain is actually a good teacher.

ISSUE FOUR:

The fourth issue is in [Hebrews 12:9-11](#) and focuses on what God’s discipline produces in a believer’s life.

Heb 12:9 **Furthermore, we have had human fathers who corrected us, and we paid them respect. Shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?**

¹⁰**For they indeed for a few days chastened us as seemed *best* to them, but He for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness.**

¹¹Now no chastening seems to be joyful for the present, but painful; nevertheless, afterward it yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

There are three distinct attributes that discipline creates in a believer’s life. The first is “**respect**” (v9), the second is “**holiness**” (v10), and the third is “**righteousness**” (v11). The word “**respect**” is the Greek word “*entrepō*” and comes from “*trepō*” which means “a turning”. It carries the idea of turning to someone and of giving reverence to that person. It involves a change of conduct toward that individual. The particular Greek word for “**holiness**” only occurs in [Hebrews 12:10](#), and it is a word that distinctly refers to a moral and spiritual purity intended for all believers committed to an intimate relationship with Christ. The term “**righteousness**” is the primary word used in the New Testament for God’s righteousness, but when it is used in reference to a believer, such as it is here, it refers to conforming their life to the standards of God’s righteousness. It is referring to a believer’s conduct.

So, what is gleaned from this trilogy of terms is that God’s discipline is always geared toward changing the believer’s conduct and their demeanor. It is one thing to be kind and another thing to be rude. It is one thing to be faithful and another thing to be indifferent. God’s discipline works on both the believer’s behavior and how they are perceived. Some people are just grouchy and always complaining. Their demeanor is demeaning to Christ. Whenever a believer is experiencing God’s discipline, it is simply because there is something in their life that needs to be changed. Something in their life has drifted far outside of the boundaries of God’s will, and in that process they have lost respect for God and His Word. They have lost the practical holiness and righteousness that is absolutely essential in the Christian life and so God in His holiness and righteousness is compelled to discipline their lives so that they become conformed to His will and not to their will.

Now, from a practical perspective, what are some of the attributes that incur God’s discipline in a believer’s life? I want to call these “triggers” or “causes”. Obviously, there are many, but only three will be provided. As these are presented, what the believer needs to do is to transparently evaluate whether or not any of these may define an area of their life that God may desire to change.

TRIGGER ONE:

The first trigger is **stubbornness**. In [Psalm 78:8](#), the Psalmist wrote these words,

Ps 78:8 **And may not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation, a generation that did not set its heart aright, and whose spirit was not faithful to God.**

God in speaking to Judah says this in [Isaiah 46:12](#),

Isa 46:12 **“Listen to Me, you stubborn-hearted, Who are far from righteousness:**

Samuel, speaking of King Saul in [1 Samuel 15:23a](#), says,

1Sa 15:23 **For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry.**

Stubbornness is a form of spiritual rebellion. It reflects someone whose heart is not right before God and whose spirit is not faithful to God. Samuel actually calls it a form of idolatry, or something that the stubborn individual actually worships. They are so inclined to living how they want to live, and that without any regard for what God’s Word says. The word “**stubbornness**” comes from a word which means “dense”, hard, stiff-necked”. The word “**stubborn**” is actually a different Hebrew word and simply means “to turn away”. So, the idea is that a person is very inclined to do what they want to do without any regard for God or His word, and in the process they literally begin to turn away from God. One of the worst things that God can do in a person’s life is to just simply let them do what they want to do, let them talk how they want to talk, let them live how they want to live, let them make decisions independent of His Word, let them have their selfish way, and let them just live a life of spiritual neglect. The result of that is never good, and never fulfilling for the individual who God disciplines in that way. It is interesting why it seems so difficult for some people to commit their lives to Christ when nothing seems to ever work out for them. Jesus was very clear when He stated this is [Matthew 16:25](#),

Mt 16:25 **For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it.**

Often, it is just related to simple stubbornness. It is just a mindset that says “*I am going to do what I want to do and say what I want to say, and no one is going to stop me*”. It is the epitome of spiritual pride, and ultimately leaves the individual totally empty and hollow, and living a purposeless and bar-

ren life. [Zechariah 7:11-12](#), speaking of Judah and why God placed them into captivity, says,

Zec 7:11 **“But they refused to heed, shrugged their shoulders, and stopped their ears so that they could not hear. ¹²Yes, they made their hearts like flint, refusing to hear the law and the words which the LORD of hosts had sent by His Spirit through the former prophets. Thus great wrath came from the LORD of hosts.**

“**Stubbornness**” is when an individual simply refuses to hear and refuses to heed God’s Word in their life. Every pastor should have great concern for Christians who are stubborn simply because he knows that God’s severe discipline is inevitable. The opposite of stubbornness is “flexibility”.

TRIGGER TWO:

The second trigger is being self-willed. The word refers to someone who is self-pleasing. I.e., they always have to have things their way. Dr. Vine says that the word denotes someone who is dominated by self-interest, is inconsiderate of others, and arrogantly asserts their own will. It is a word that characterizes someone who is always grumbling and complaining, someone who is always speaking their mind on things. The opposite of this word is “gentleness”.

TRIGGER THREE:

The third trigger is being disobedient. There is not much else that will so bring on the discipline of God in a believer’s life more than willful disobedience. No disobedience is good, but when that disobedience is willful, deliberate, and conscious, and when the believer knows full well that they are violating the Word of God and still living outside of the boundaries of God and they are willing to continue in that sin, the discipline of God is inevitable. The discipline will not be pleasant, but painful.

The following are three principles on how a believer should deal with God’s discipline in their life. It will come. There will be things in every believer’s life that God simply chooses to deal with, and when He does, it is critical that the believer does not resist God’s divine work in their life.

PRINCIPLE ONE: Do not forget God’s exhortation regarding discipline ([Hebrews 12:5](#)). His discipline is a normal part of the Christian life, and it will happen in every believer’s life, so when it does simply do not forget that He has reminded every believer of it.

PRINCIPLE TWO: Be grateful for God’s discipline. It is a friend and it is what God uses to develop His qualities and His character in the believer. In [Hebrews 12:7](#), the writer simply says to “**endure chastening**”. It means to stay under God’s discipline and God’s work in their life. God is shaping the believer and molding them into His image, and the fruit that His discipline will produce in the believer’s life will be more than obvious and will greatly benefit their life.

PRINCIPLE THREE: The believer is to yield their life to God’s discipline ([Hebrews 12:9b](#)). They are to simply submit their life to His correction without complaining and whining and murmuring. The phrase to “**be in subjection**” means to willingly place oneself under God’s care, power, and strength, and to surrender themselves to Him so that they can benefit from what He is doing in their life. The more that a believer is willingly yield themselves to God’s work in their life, the more meaningful and fulfilling their life will become.

ENDNOTES

¹Vine’s, 452.

²Strong’s, 1265.

³Vine’s, 399-400.

⁴Strong’s, 1086.

⁵Renn’s, 496.

⁶Strong’s, 798.

⁷Strong’s, 691.

⁸Vine’s, 1014.

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