

We've just been through an amazing Easter season where we've prayed, sung, and heard about the Gospel. But it raises an interesting question.

What is the Gospel?

It seems like a fairly simple question understood fairly universally across Churches, in Adelaide and beyond! It's the good news, right?

But what exactly is that good news? Do we know what the Gospel is? What kind of thing it is? A general summation? Is it a person?

To try and understand what people mean by the Gospel, I asked a few of my friends online to let me know their thoughts.

Let me read some of these for you

Well simply I'd say,.. the gospel is the good news of Jesus and how he brings hope to the world

The first thing that comes to mind for me is the gospel is the book of life, meaning the only book that truly leads us to live a fruitful life in the way of Jesus. Of course, as long as we actually choose to accept it as absolute truth and practically live it out in faith and apply it to our everyday lives.

The gospel is the good news! It is the life of Jesus, a new way of living & our redemption through the death and resurrection of Christ. The debt of our sin is paid for and there is new life through Jesus.

To me the gospel is like a survival book- similar to first aid guides and self-help books- it's designed to keep you alive, healthy and thriving except it differs in the fact that it's also real people's stories and lives that have been touched by Jesus/God.

As you can see, there are a few responses here. They all circle very similar ideas, they often repeat similar phrases.

The Gospel is the Good News, the life of Jesus, the stories of Jesus, the good news of Jesus and hope, Jesus saving us from our sins.

Looking at these, I think most of them you'd be hard-pressed to deny the truth they have, generally. But as you can see, there isn't exactly a single idea within all of these.

And so we want to be a people who spread the Gospel, but the issue is, of course, how can we spread something if we don't truly know what it means?

That's where I want us to go today.

I want to look at:

Diagnose the problem and where we've got it a little wrong

Have a look at what Jesus and Paul meant when they said Gospel

And finally, what it means for our lives.

The reality is that the Gospel has become an all too often used word that has potentially lost its meaning to many of us. An "in" lingo that sounds like a thing a Christian ought to say.

Many, when asked what the Gospel is, refer to what has been called the John 3:16 Gospel. It's also been called the "Ticket to Heaven" Gospel, which rose to popularity in the early 20th century.

That Jesus died for our sins, and that we are now saved through His actions. Again, this is not wrong, but it doesn't really capture the reality or the depth that we are offered in scripture.

Unfortunately, for many Christians, the Gospel has been reduced to a message of personal salvation.

And this makes sense right? We live in a hyper-individualistic self-help culture where the individual is what matters most. And so contemporary Christianity has, at times, catered toward this, making the gospel about how you get saved and what Jesus has done for you.

The tricky part is, that this isn't entirely incorrect.

We are saved through Jesus. What he did on the cross has saved us.

The issues arise when this becomes the sole focus.

It can create a faith focused on the self, how I am saved, how God loves and looks after me, creates worship and music focussed our needs, and builds an insular faith where justice and love for others are pushed to the side.

This has led to a surface-level faith, or what Bonhoeffer called cheap grace.

The Church, in an effort to grow and gain believers, created a 'salvation culture' instead of a 'gospel culture'.

Dallas Willard, the Christian philosopher, called it the Gospel of Sin-Management.

“Evangelicals have cut the Gospel down to mean simply believing that Jesus died for your sins. That is the Gospel, they say. And what they mean is that if you believe that Jesus died for your sins, then enough merit will be transferred from His account to yours, so when you show up at the pearly gates, they won't be able to find a reason to keep you out.

History has brought us to the point where the Christian message is thought to be essentially concerned only with how to deal with sin: with wrongdoing or wrong-being and its effects. Life, our actual existence, is not included in what is now presented as the heart of the Christian message”

And so while we have been proclaiming a truth about salvation, it isn't the full picture. It is an incomplete story. And this incomplete story has consequences.

In his book *The King Jesus Gospel*, Theologian Scot McKnight says that 90% of kids raised in a Christian household give their lives to Christ. Of that 90%, only 22% still follow Jesus at age 35.

I'm 37 this year, and so many of my friends who came to faith in the early 2000s are no longer in church. Are no longer following Jesus.

A salvation Gospel has left the church with a shallow and unsustainable faith for many.

And if I'm honest, I wasn't immune to that.

For a long time, I thought I understood the Gospel... but my life told a different story.

These photos are from the late 2000s when I was working in nightclubs.

I had declared myself saved and a Christian as an early teenager, and had been attending church with my family, had Christian friends, just living life.

Once I had finished school, there was an opportunity for me to start working in a club in the city. From there, I rapidly grew my business and reputation and started working 3 nights week across Hindley Street, taking photos at clubs, festivals and all sorts of places.

See, I thought, “Well, I’m saved, I’m a Christian, so I can do this and be a light to the world”.

Unfortunately, that isn’t what ended up happening. Instead, I was working 3 to 4 nights a week and drinking each night heavily to ensure I had the right vibe for town. I bailed on life responsibilities, on my church community, and on my family at times. I viewed people as a way to grow my brand or to get a higher social standing and saw women as objects for my fulfillment rather than image bearers.

My life suddenly didn’t reflect someone who was a Christian. The reality was that I was ruled BY the world. My life and actions reflected that of the culture around me.

A salvation culture would have said to me, “well it is ok, you’re saved”.

A Gospel Culture would have asked the question, “Is Jesus the ruler over your life?”

So if the Gospel is more than just personal Salvation, what did Paul actually mean when he talked about the Gospel?

The first thing is to look at the word itself, see if it can help us discover more about what it means.

The Greek word used throughout the NT is **Euangelion**.

It’s where we get our words for evangelist and evangelism.

Now, feel free to shout out, when I say an evangelist, what image or who comes to your mind?

I think they all sound pretty reasonable. My mind often goes to Billy Graham, the man up on the pulpit yelling and bringing people to Christ. Or perhaps that person on social media who constantly posts about their faith and wants others to know Jesus.

These are good examples of what it means to be an evangelist. However, in the time when the gospels and Paul’s letters were written, there was a slightly different meaning.

This is a Roman evangelist or herald.

This guy would travel the countryside announcing to all citizens who weren't near the capital or hadn't heard the news.

He would inform them that they have a new king or emperor and that life has now changed.

An example of this was the Roman Emperor Augustus, who became emperor after the long War of Actium in 31 BC, in which he defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra, solidifying his control over Rome.

It was said about him that he was "a bringer of peace, or a saviour."

Sound familiar?

And it really was good news for Rome. After years of fighting and struggling, this announcement was a sigh of relief because it meant there was someone in charge, bringing them peace and looking after them.

This is the same for us in telling the good news, or as NT Wright prefers, the Good Announcement.

An announcement after which EVERYTHING changes.

With this picture in our mind, perhaps we can start to understand what the Gospel is.

Jesus is the new king.

This is one of the reasons that Jesus was such a controversial figure, because the language that was being used about him was in direct opposition to Rome and its king.

Now this wasn't new language for a first-century Jew. They would have very clearly understood what Jesus and his Disciples were saying.

They had been waiting for a messiah. They were longing for the good news of this saviour to come.

In Isaiah 52, we first see this kingdom language, a messianic hope for one who will come.

Therefore my people will know my name;
therefore in that day they will know
that it is I who foretold it.
Yes, it is I."

How beautiful on the mountains
are the feet of those who bring good news,
who proclaim peace,
who bring good tidings,
who proclaim salvation,
who say to Zion,
“Your God reigns!”

Throughout Isaiah, there are numerous passages referring to a new ruler who will come and be king.

It tells the story of the Bible, the grand narrative of how God is going to reconcile humanity back with Him.

Moving into the New Testament.

In Matthew 4:23 it says “Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people”

In Mark 1:14-15 it says “After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. “The time has come,” he said. “The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”

Jesus speaks about the Kingdom around 90 times, so I think we can see the picture that this idea of kingship and Kingdom were important.

This was no different in the early church. Paul’s writings had extremely powerful and controversial statements, followed by others in the early church proclaiming that same kingdom language.

It is as if they were saying ‘Let us tell you who the real king is’.

It isn’t hard to imagine why this got them into so much trouble with the authorities.

This brings us back to our passage for today.

This is, by many scholars, considered to be THE key text when it comes to understanding the Gospel.

“15 Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you

are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain.

3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.”

When we read that Christ died for our sins, our eyes light up. WE KNOW THIS! We've heard it over and over again and feel a connection to it. And why not? Again, it isn't wrong; it is good and joyous news for us.

But let's not skip past the full story that is being told in this passage.

Paul very deliberately uses a line twice that indicates there is more going on here than just our personal salvation.

According to the scriptures.

See Paul isn't introducing something new here. He isn't explaining that the story of Jesus has come out of nowhere. He is grounding it in the very story of the Bible.

From Genesis as the promise of relationship, through God's chosen people, through the Exodus story, repeated failures of kings, ALL of it finds its conclusion in Jesus.

Paul, in the middle of his letter, is acknowledging that Jesus, in his earthly ministry, was the fulfilment of the word God had given the Jews. A story that told of a messiah.

His kingship, inaugurated through his incarnation, death, resurrection, and ascension, is the royal procession that displays him as our new and wonderful king.

Even the imagery of the passion speaks to his nature as royalty.

The triumphal entry into Jerusalem, the purple robe, the crown of thorns, the sign above His head, all of this points toward Jesus as the true king.

Of course, that isn't the end of the story. As I mentioned before, this was God's plan to rescue us. As a result of Jesus as king, we ARE saved.

We do have a good announcement to share with the world because salvation is exciting; we can't overlook that.

But that isn't the whole story we have to tell; there is something deeper at work.

We can only be followers of Christ under the reign of Christ. We need to have a Gospel culture, not a salvation culture. We don't need members, we need disciples.

This kingdom brings with it a different set of standards.

See, my story didn't end. When I began to recognise that Jesus is King over my life, and not just my Saviour, it changed me. It changed how I relate to people, how I speak, how I dress, and how I spend my money.

This process isn't complete. I fail daily BUT It continues to change me day after day as I follow Jesus, discipling and learning to walk in his ways.

This is the power of the Gospel. Not simply that we are saved, although we are, but we are a changed people because we have a new king.

Not only does it change the way we live, but it also changes our outlook on the world.

We need this good news because we cannot, on our own, make a "better world". We need a king to rule our lives, and from that point, we can then change the world through the good news.

There is a sense of relief, we don't need to fix everything.

With so much suffering and so much pain, and trouble, we now have a good king who loves us and will bat for us. It's like finally having a government that is ensuring all our needs are met. Imagine the relief that would bring to this city, let alone the country. Or perhaps to other countries across the world whose leaders seem to be hellbent on destruction.

When we recognise the announcement that we have a good, merciful, just, loving, powerful King, this takes SO much pressure off us.

When Lucy and I have submitted to God's kingdom, recognising that we can't control or do anything in our own power, we've seen God powerfully move.

Don't confuse this with laziness or the prosperity gospel which means we get blessings in life when we tithe etc

What I mean is we don't have to worry because the kingdom is near.

Jesus is our king and we can have hope in following his rule.

I have been disappointed over and over again by life, but I can count on him because I know a good king is reigning. I can have hope.

And to me, THAT is exactly why the Good News of Jesus as King has so much power.

Scot McKnight put it this way:

“The story of Jesus isn’t about us. It will redeem us, it will shoulder and remove our sins, we are justified, and we are filled with the Spirit BUT it is a story about Jesus. We are called to tell this story.”

We have good news to share, a grand announcement, a new king reigns, and we do not need to worry because he is a good, loving, grace-filled King.

We must live as if the proclamation of King Jesus changes everything, and then practically follow Jesus’ teachings, becoming members of his Kingdom as disciples or apprentices under him.

The question is “how has and is the good news changing things in your life?”

And so as we move out of here today, just as Paul encourages in 2 Timothy 2:8

"Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel".